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"NOW THEIR GRAND TRILOGY COMES TO ITS FINAL ENTRY"

**ROBIN VALENTINE**Twitter
@robinvalentine

This month
Forged his white hot, overflowing rage into one historically bad tweet, then deleted it.

made. Now their grand trilogy comes to its final entry, and it feels bigger, more confident and more creative than ever.

So, of course, we're all over it – and we've got the feature to prove it.

ROBIN VALENTINE**PRINT EDITOR**

robin.valentine@futurenet.com

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The PC Gamer team

**FRASER BROWN**Twitter
@FraserIBrown

This month
Fraser eats strategy and breathes Warhammer. He also poos RAM. Doctors are at a loss to explain it.

**MORGAN PARK**Twitter
@MorganRPark

This month
Checked out the game formerly known as *Quarantine*. No idea why they changed the name.

**RACHEL WATTS**Twitter
@rachel_watts

This month
Learned about the threat to society posed by the 'druid mafia' in *Tactical Breach Wizards*.

**STEVEN MESSNER**Twitter
@stevenmessner

This month
Remember when everyone was obsessed with Lord of the Rings? Steven remembers.

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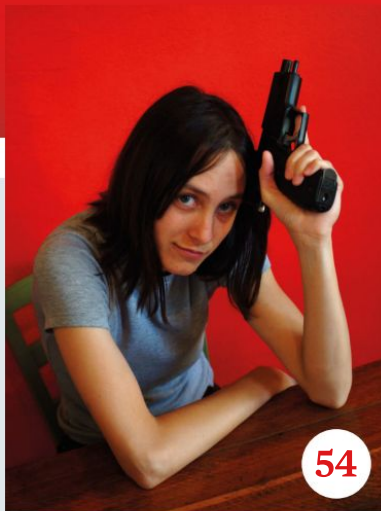
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MONITOR

NEWS | OPINION | DEVELOPMENT



Dream: "I figured it's out of the way, and it would be a story I would tell in a few years when no one really cared. I told a couple people and just felt like the community had been through enough drama and that it was pointless."

NIGHTMARE

Minecraft speedrunner **DREAM** admits to 'accidentally' cheating in record-setting run

Dream is a hugely popular YouTuber and *Minecraft* speedrunner who has nearly 23 million subscribers on YouTube and 1.5 million followers on Twitter. His runs break records and make the *Minecraft* world speedrun leaderboard, to the astonishment of many viewers. But suspicions arose about their legitimacy and, in particular, there were accusations about tampering to get better luck.

The controversy began in October 2020 when a speedrunner reported seeing higher RNG drops for key

items in a run submitted by Dream earlier that month, which placed fifth on the world leaderboards. Various other runs then came into question because of the high drop rates of two key items – ender pearls and blaze rods – both of which are needed to finish as quickly as possible. Moderators at

speedrun.com analysed six of Dream's streams and found the odds of getting his exact drops were an "unfathomably small" 1 in 177 billion. "There are no circumstances in a natural setting in which bartering and blaze drops could be dependent or biased to any notable degree, much less a degree strong enough to produce this result," they wrote.

As a result Dream's speedrun was disallowed, and the record removed. Dream denied the accusations of cheating, the moderation team fired back, accusations of bad math were made, and there was big social media beef between supporters of both sides, because of course there was.

**OTHER RUNS THEN
CAME INTO QUESTION
BECAUSE OF THE HIGH
DROP RATES**

BATTLE OF THE AGES

APPLE ROASTED



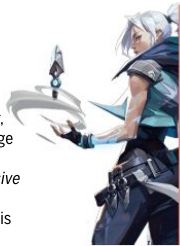
It seems Intel has shed all shame in burning bridges with Apple. In a call, we watched as the company utterly tore Apple a new one. It backed this thrown shade with graphs and gammy gameplay footage, until it had preached its superiority into the ground. Seriously, though, calm down. ■ **KW**

VALIANT

RIOT CELEBRATES



Launched in June 2020, Riot's *Valorant* has had a wildly successful first year, and now attracts an average of 14 million players a month. For context, *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* has just under 27 million a month, but that's been out since 2012. This game is here for the long haul. ■ **RS**



A HORSE, OF COURSE

HORSING AROUND



Viking survival sandbox developer Iron Gate has gone and bought itself a horse named 'Valheim'. But while the dev stresses that this doesn't mean horses will be coming to *Valheim* soon, there'll be a marked increase in the amount of good horse photos on the studio's social channels. ■ **NC**



TOP: Some of Dream's fans behaved badly during this controversy, which to be fair he has called out and tried to stop. "The whole situation was extremely shitty overall for everyone involved and I wish that I could go back and do things differently."

ABOVE: Dream said the mod had other effects that weren't noted. "Ender eyes had a low chance of breaking when thrown, and enderman dropped pearls at a much higher percentage."

NEED FOR SPEED

Dream eventually called the decision to remove his runs "respectable" and apologised for his initial reaction. Things went quiet, until Dream wrote a post "About speedrunning" acknowledging that he had in fact been using mods that adjusted the drop rates, albeit insisting this was not intentional.

Dream explained that in "challenge videos" made before the *Minecraft* 1.16 update, he increased the enderman spawn rates and pearl drop rate. He continued using this as a server-side plugin after 1.16, claiming he was "99% sure" it wasn't running; of course, it was.

Following the discovery "a couple months ago" Dream took down his response video but didn't comment on the matter further for fear of reigniting the drama. "I didn't want to be the centre of controversy for the hundredth time." After this, Dream's older speedruns were also removed and Dream acknowledges it's a fair move.

"I'm not really sure what I'm expecting out of all of this, but I just felt like I had a huge weight on my shoulder and I want to get it off," he wrote. "I'm sorry to anyone that I let down or disappointed." The controversy doesn't seem to have damaged Dream's popularity: his most recent video currently has over 40 million views.

Andy Chalk

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

Phone phreaks

The Epic vs Apple trial began with botched audio access, with kids able to enter and scream at the court. Appropriate? No. Funny? Yes.

GPU hope

Ethereum cryptocurrency will soon be based on storage instead of GPUs.

Double bongcloud

World chess champion Magnus Carlsen took part in an opening dubbed 'the double bongcloud'.

Calm down

Paradox Interactive says the toxicity on its forums recently is driving its developers away. Chill out people.

Burning bridges

Blizzard continues to anger players with fees, the latest a \$35 charge for *WoW Classic* players to 'clone' their avatars. The company then relented.

Not-so elite

Elite: Dangerous' Odyssey expansion was a little bit of a fiasco, to the extent Frontier's CEO apologised.

LOWS



The Spy

BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

Sorry, dear readers. Here you are settling in to enjoy The Spy's personal brand of autobiographical hijinks and spurious gaming rumours (and absolute nonsense of course, but you love it. Well I hope so anyway), and here The Spy is with absolutely nothing to show for it. You see, once every year, the magazine production

cycle conspires against The Spy, with an issue that's made just *before* E3, but released weeks afterwards. And so yes, The Spy has rumours. They just won't survive the printing process.

Battlefield 2042? You already know about it. The Spy asks that you imagine the level of surprise you would feel if The Spy was announcing it for the first time here on this page, your face lighting up in childlike wonder ("Please sir, can I have some war?") at the prospect of mass warfare in an era just a couple of decades removed from our own. 2042?! Just imagine it! The phones will look slightly different. The cars will look slightly different. The guns... well, you get the idea.

Maybe there'll be stealth technology – like how there already is in the present day – but better and more futuristic. Maybe there'll be robots – like how there already is in the present day – but better and more futuristic. Maybe a bad man will hack an AI in service of cinematic explosions in a dramatic cutscene.



THE SPY

The Spy reminds you that this is still a rumour page, despite all evidence to the contrary.

It's a brave studio that picks the most boring part of the future as their setting for a game. 2042 is just going to be now, but moreso. Your mileage may vary here, but now isn't a time The Spy has any particular fondness for, and so more of it isn't a place The Spy is keen to visit. "What if the present day, but worse?" is hardly as enticing a prospect as the industry often seems to think.

FUTURE SHOCK

Instead, The Spy would like to pitch a new idea for DICE's consideration: *Battlefield 2042*. Civilisation has died, been rebuilt and died again another six or seven times. Humans? Gone. Animals? Gone. Robots? In space. All that remains on Earth is warring masses of radioactive fungus. Players each control a portion of their side's fungal mass, manipulating it slowly along the ground as you try to spread your spores or tie up the world with your mycelial fragmentation, which is less sexy than it sounds.

Obviously each mass is impervious to physical damage – how else would they survive the barren lava fields on which they battle? – and so the objective is to roll over and consume materials from long-dead civilisations, using them to imagine psychic submarines to brain project their mental payloads into an opposing mass. Enough attacks will leave the other side too sad to continue, thus giving your side more room to consume the world.

And sure, The Spy is not a game designer. Maybe there are practicalities here that The Spy has been overlooking. Maybe computers are not yet powerful enough to generate acres of pulsating fungal ooze. That's fine. It doesn't have to be *this*. The point is the future is a big place, and you're free to do whatever you want with it. It doesn't have to be a near-future war full of soldiers and guns and maybe those terrifying robot dogs.

Will that stop The Spy from playing *Battlefield 2042*?

Of course not. It's got a grappling hook, and, perhaps more importantly, doesn't seem to be bothering with a battle royale mode. Maybe that is DICE's boldest prediction for the years to come, and, if it comes true, perhaps it won't be too bleak a future after all. Spy out. ■

The Spy

HUMANS? GONE. ANIMALS? GONE. ROBOTS? IN SPACE

This month in... 2011



1 "Best on PC" proclaims our cover line for, er, *Aliens: Colonial Marines*. All things are relative, we suppose. Obviously Gearbox's shooter did not prove to be the 'real' Aliens sequel, but that's the gamble you take when picking a game for your magazine cover. *Colonial Marines* had plenty of promise, it just failed to meet it. At least we still got *Isolation*.

ISSUE
229, August 2011
ON THE COVER
Aliens: Colonial Marines
IN THE CINEMAS
The King's Speech



2 This issue is filled with disappointments. Gracing our lead review slot is one *Duke Nukem Forever*. "Petty, nasty, and anachronistic," we said. 29%.

3 What about those "10 hot WoW beaters" promised on the cover? Yeah, so, about those. A few – *Guild Wars 2*, *The Old Republic* and *War Thunder* – do still exist, even if *WoW* still remains one of the most popular MMOs in operation right now. Others – *Firefly* and *Warhammer 40K: Dark Millennium Online* – not so much.

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Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES



A rare look at the homes of ordinary people in 40K.

BOOK SMART

Best-selling 40K novelist **DAN ABNETT** is co-writing **WARHAMMER 40,000: DARKTIDE**

Ask a Warhammer 40,000 fan which books to read, and they'll recommend Dan Abnett's. His stories of morally compromised Inquisitor detectives and soldiers bonding behind the razorwire are a great entry point, starring relatively ordinary characters rather than armoured giants. He's a perfect choice to join Fatshark as co-writer on *Warhammer 40,000: Darktide*, a co-op game that casts players as regular grunts investigating cult-related goings-on.

"I love the universe as a whole, obviously," Abnett says. "I've spent a lot of time there, so I love all the stuff to do with it. Obviously there are iconic elements like Space Marines that represent 40K in a nutshell, but I've always gravitated towards human characters because they seem to me to give the best place for a reader, or a player in this case, to relate to. The human condition and that kind of stuff. Just a regular person who's not augmented or empowered by Astartes gifts or anything like that. It's something to identify with and to relate to, but also a great place from which to see the universe, because you are the smallest thing in it."

Anders De Geer, Fatshark's game director, agrees that depicting the setting from the bottom, seeing the stars from the gutter, is a valuable approach. "I think that Dan's

books have at least helped me personally to really understand 40K and really get the perspective of everything," he explains.

It's a setting where humankind has formed an Imperium of over a million worlds, a society so vast it's hard to feel individual lives matter. It's also dark to the point of absurdity. Chaos gods from another reality hunger for mortal souls, and they'll be lucky to get them before aliens who consume biological matter on a planetary scale eat the entire Milky Way. It combines enormity with enormity.

"There comes a point where it's so mind-bogglingly bleak," says Abnett. "What is it Adams says? 'It's a long way down the road to the shop, but that's just peanuts to space'. It's so big that there is a danger of overkill after a while, where you're going 'I'm overwhelmed by the sheer scale'. I always found that very useful in the novels, to have that human anchor point, because you could reduce the scale, or at least you could sympathise with the feelings of the people caught within that. I think that helps with the culture shock."

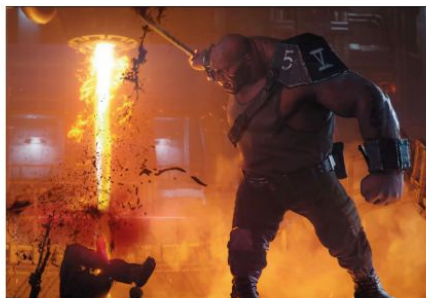
HOME SWEET HOME

So does having a place in that universe. In *Darktide* that's an Inquisitor's starship, a hub to talk to NPCs, get mission briefings, change gear, "all those sorts of things



Who am I?

"You start the game as sort of a prisoner," Abnett says, "an unwilling recruit into this life of serving the Inquisitor [...] It's a matter of establishing your own... what's the word? Value, I suppose, in this team of very, very tough professionals who've seen it all before, done it all before, and are kind of using you as cannon fodder."



FAR LEFT: A look at computers in the *Darktide* hub. Can they run *Crysis*?

LEFT: We'll be playing relatively ordinary characters, though one is an ogryn.

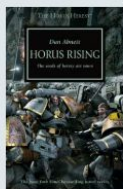
BOOKS FOR THE BOOK THRONE Which Dan Abnett books should you read first?



FIRST AND ONLY
Book one in the Gaunt's Ghosts series, which chronicle the lives of the "poor fucking infantry" of the Imperial Guard. It's World War I in space.



XENOS
The Eisenhorn series, currently being adapted for TV, begins with this hardboiled crime story. There's a cabal and a dark tome, and a lot of first-person narrating.



HORUS RISING
The Horus Heresy prequel saga may be set 10,000 years before other 40K books but are best saved for later. Go back here to see how it all went wrong.



TITAN
Comics are an influence so of course there are 40K comics too. Abnett's *Titan* follows the pilot of an Imperial god-machine – like a mech having a goth phase.

that you would expect to be able to do in a game. We've put some work into making that cool as well, to give it the sort of personality of things that you've seen in books like the Eisenhorn books".

If you've ever asked a group of players in *Diablo* to wait while you change your hat, then looked up to see they've moved on, you'll understand the value of making that a location rather than a menu. Between-mission hubs create space for downtime moments where the adrenaline cools off and you reshuffle your loadout. Fatshark knows this well, having crafted two hubs for the *Vermintide* games.

"The starship is much bigger in the sense of player count than the *Vermintide* hub," De Geer says. "It's more of an actual hub with NPCs and people to interact with, but also other players of course." The hub will contain "players that are not in your team", he confirms.

The enemies you face in *Darktide* are plague-worshipping servants of the Chaos god Nurgle. Those who aren't zombified poxwalkers are mutated and grotesque, covered in buboes, cankers, and a whole lot of pus. They're unpleasant is what I'm getting at.

"I've sometimes been quite startled by how 40K visualises when you portray it in a sort of essentially photorealistic sense," Abnett says, "rather than the imagination filtered through the prose of a novel or something like that. When you actually get down to it, you go 'Wow, that's really not nice at all.'"

Unlike a novel, we'll be approaching the story of *Darktide* in an unpredictable sequence, chatting to each

other while plot is happening. Fatshark already knows how to deal with this, of course.

"It's first and foremost a co-op game," De Geer says, "and we still want to keep it as co-op friendly as possible. Like, we can't have mid-level cutscenes. Or we can't, the first time you play a level, have this specific dialogue, because it might be someone else's 100th run."

Narrative gets shifted to other places. "A lot of the storytelling is in the actual level," says De Geer. That creates additional challenge, because those environments include ordinary places other 40K games haven't needed to visualise. "So apartments," he says by way of example, "there are a million items we need to represent. And just like in *Vermintide*, we take great pride in trying to be as correct as humanly possible at Fatshark. It's so nice to be able to spam Dan with like 'Do they use forks in 40K?'"

Abnett began by writing a 30-page reference document about life in 40K, but says it wasn't close to extensive enough. "If I'm writing a novel I take the reader by the hand and I lead them through the bits of the universe I want them to see. I can show them certain things in a great deal of detail, but I can also go 'You don't need to look in there. We don't need to know how toilets work.'"

So do they use forks? I mean, this is 40K. Maybe they use knives for everything, because that's how hardcore they are. Or perhaps it's skulls? There's nothing characters in 40K won't turn into skulls.

"They use forks," says Abnett. ■

Jody Macgregor

"IT'S SO NICE TO BE ABLE TO SPAM DAN WITH LIKE 'DO THEY USE FORKS IN 40K?'"

Positive Influence

INSPIRATIONS AND CONNECTIONS IN GAMES

HICK-ARUS

From battle royale to burnout with former *DayZ* director **BRIAN HICKS**

There was no *PUBG* when Brian Hicks and Jordan Tayer conceived the *Survivor GameZ*, a last-player-standing tournament for *DayZ*. But in 2012, *The Hunger Games* was an international movie phenomenon, and Tayer couldn't stop talking about its potential.

"He just kept pushing that point," Hicks recalls. "The more he talked about it, the more I realised he'd push to make it happen, whether or not anyone had the ability to technically implement it. He put me in a position where if I didn't jump in, learn how the hell *Arma 2* worked, and figure it out, we were going to land flat on our face and everyone at work was going to see it."

At the time, Hicks was a company man at Microsoft Studios, project managing by day and streaming *DayZ* by night. But suddenly, he was working flat out to build a 32-player event version of Chernarus. "I didn't have time to overthink things," he says. "I didn't have time to doubt myself. We had two or three weeks to get our first prototype working, because that's the date Jordan put on all our promotional material."

The events snowballed in popularity, becoming a bimonthly spectator sport that attracted 263,000 viewers. For a while, Hicks acted as tech developer, session admin, and talent wrangler, as well as spawning objects into the world as the de facto dungeon master. The stress didn't exactly endear him towards what he was creating.

"I hated the *Survivor GameZ*," Hicks says. "I hated the idea of what we now know as battle royale, I never competed in one of the events. There were so many times where I was like 'If this died tomorrow, I would be happy'.

But it was succeeding, and having my creative output succeed felt good." To this day, Hicks can't face playing *PUBG* or any of its battle royale peers. For him, they're associated with pressure and burnout. Thankfully, though, the experience didn't taint his love for survival games – and did attract the attention of Dean Hall, who hired Hicks to work on standalone *DayZ*.

CZECH MATES

Working in the Czech Republic offices of Bohemia Interactive proved to be the game development equivalent of method acting. For almost half a decade, Hicks inhaled the Mnisek countryside and breathed it out again as *DayZ*.

"It's tangible," he says. "For years one of the loading splash screens was a foggy shot of trees with zombies off in the distance. That was a real life picture. We drove out north of Prague, near the Polish border, to these reddish, rocky spires. That area is in *DayZ* now."

Players will know the Tisy military base, which in reality is located three and a half kilometres up the road from the Mnisek studio. "It's an abandoned Soviet surface-to-air missile installation," Hicks says. "Early warning from when it was Czechoslovakia and behind the Iron Curtain. I've got gigabytes of footage."

DayZ's vehicles, meanwhile, came from photographs taken of old Skodas on Hicks' Canon 5D Mark II camera, around Lipová village – which itself is recreated almost one-to-one in Chernarus as Stary Sobor, the map's largest central town. "*DayZ* was definitely a project that pulled from reference more than anything," Hicks says. "We almost never had any concept art at all."

The project was a learning curve for Bohemia Interactive, which found itself at the centre of a new genre after years in simulation shooters like *Arma*. In that sense the studio, "sometimes begrudgingly", became a student of Hicks and Hall – the pair teaching their employer in the ways of the survival game. Though both men have since moved on, you can still see their lessons in Bohemia's *Vigor*, a shelter-building shooter set in post-war Norway.

Hicks resumed his role as teacher while at InXile, the RPG developer behind *Wasteland*, on a cancelled VR survival game. He found a willing pupil in Brian Fargo. "There was a lot of give and take there," Hicks says.

Today though, Hicks works at Hall's RocketWerkz, on the upcoming survival game *Icarus*. "It just felt right," he says. "Throughout my whole career, I've always worked in sandboxes and virtual worlds. That's my thing. That's what keeps me up at night." ■

Jeremy Peel

BATON ROYALE

The projects that passed the torch to PUBG



MINECRAFT HUNGER GAMES
Recreated the initial, bloody fight for equipment, as well as the drawn-out deathmatch after.



DAYZ: BATTLE ROYALE
This mod launched the career of Brendan 'PlayerUnknown' Greene.



H1Z1: KING OF THE KILL
Greene consulted on this branch of Daybreak's zombie game. It's available as *Z1 Battle Royale*.



TO THIS DAY, HICKS CAN'T FACE PLAYING PUBG OR ANY OF ITS BATTLE ROYALE PEERS



FAR LEFT: *Survivor GameZ* was initially called *Hunger GameZ*, until Dean Hall advised a rebrand.

LOWER LEFT: In space, you can't hear a tree scream as you chop it down.



DNA Tracing



TERRITORIAL ARMY

How FPS masters **SPLASH DAMAGE** went from team-based to turn-based

Sniper, soldier, medic, engineer: the characters in Splash Damage games are specialists who know one thing, and know it well. For almost 20 years, that was true for the studio too – a team of former modders who became trusted by players and publishers alike for their singular dedication to the art of class-based multiplayer shooting. But lately, that narrow focus hasn't served Splash Damage as well as it once did. The company has instead survived by doing something that was never possible in the first-person shooters of old: multi-classing.

It wouldn't be accurate to say that the nascent Splash Damage developed the first ever class-based FPS – Robin Walker and his future Valve colleagues had invented the Pyro and Spy by 1999 for *Quake's* *Team Fortress* mod. But Splash Damage came from the same milieu, using a souped-up version of id Software's engine to create the popular *Quake 3* *Fortress*. If you played the Recon class, you got to be quick on your feet, carry a nailgun, and throw stun grenades. Or you could pick the Flametrooper, who was slower but sturdier and packing napalm. Only by compensating for each others' weaknesses and working together to capture objectives could teams triumph.

It was an ambitious departure from the vanilla *Quake* games, which had offered only the symmetrical challenge of the FPS arena. This new idea suggested something more tactical and varied lay just beyond the horizon – if only the games industry could catch up with the modders.

ON THE BRINK

Like so many significant shooter developers of the past two decades, Splash Damage found itself slingshotted into the big leagues by id Software's orbit. After making fan favourite maps for *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*, the studio was commissioned to build *Enemy*

Territory, a standalone spin-off that brought its trademark teamplay to BJ Blazkiewicz's backyard. Unusually for the time, *Enemy Territory* was free – becoming a fixture of magazine cover discs and a quintessential PC gaming experience of the period.

Splash Damage went on to adapt the *Enemy Territory* concept for *Quake 4*, and worked on *Doom 3's* multiplayer – testament to the respect it had earned from the FPS genre's progenitors. But the studio made a bold bid for independence from id's properties with *Brink*, a game that proved fatally ahead of its time.

Revealed just months after *Mirror's Edge* was released in 2009, *Brink's* debut trailer showed multiplayer FPS avatars moving in ways they never had before – vaulting over cover, running along walls, and landing smoothly in forward rolls, retaining momentum as they advanced on the enemy. Without compromising on its commitment to class-based combat and objective-driven design, Splash Damage incorporated parkour into the flow of its maps. It advised that, as a rule, players should be moving more often than they were shooting.

Played in 2021, the parkour feels somewhat sticky, as if your character had magnets glued to their palms. But if *Brink's* implementation feels dated, that's because its innovations have been seized on by the games industry at large. *Titanfall* took verticality further in 2014, and *Doom* introduced mantling a couple of years later. Even *Call of Duty* embraced wallrunning during its sci-fi phase, and the legacy of all these movement mechanics can still be felt in *Apex Legends* and *Warzone*. *Brink* wasn't met by millions of players on release, the way its descendants have been – but Splash Damage and Bethesda were certainly vindicated for investing in its concept.

COCKNEY CRIME

Perhaps the mistake was to push the boundaries on too many fronts. *Brink* also saw Splash Damage

MOD-EL CITIZENS

Mod teams turned studios



TRIPWIRE INTERACTIVE
Red Orchestra was a conversion for *Unreal Tournament 2004*, before becoming an unforgiving FPS in its own right.



UNKNOWN WORLDS
The *Subnautica* team grew out of a *Half-Life* mod, which was acclaimed for mixing RTS elements into deathmatch.



KAOS STUDIOS
These *Battlefield* modders were nabbed by DICE as Trauma Studios, then shut down. They became Kaos Studios, which also shut.



QUAKE 3 FORTRESS

A mod, but more important than most full games.

WOLFENSTEIN: ENEMY TERRITORY

The best multiplayer FPS of its time.

DOOM 3

Splash Damage made the multiplayer maps.

ENEMY TERRITORY: QUAKE WARS

Transposed the teamplay to space.

BRINK

Ahead of the parkour pack.

DIRTY BOMB

Watered-down *Enemy Territory*.

GEARS OF WAR 4

Splash Damage handled matchmaking and map design.

GEARS 5

The studio was invited back for the sequel.

GEARS TACTICS

XCOM-esque strategy with a shooter mindset.

KEY

- Splash Damage
- id Software
- The Coalition



AREA OF EFFECT

The making of Splash Damage

RAD SOLDIERS

An early dabble in turn-based tactics.

✖ establish an appetite for worldbuilding, positing that a multiplayer shooter was perfectly capable of hosting a story – so long as it hinged on a conflict between two factions. The *Brink* universe was a climate change parable in which rising oceans had confined humanity to a single Ark city, where the survivors fought either for order or freedom. Matches were bookended by cutscenes, and together formed a single-player style campaign for whichever side you chose to represent.

Brink's follow-up, *Dirty Bomb*, featured a similarly high concept. Set in Splash Damage's hometown of London, it recreated recognisable chunks of the capital in the aftermath of a mass evacuation. Either you were working to cover up the radiation incident as a mercenary for the Central Disaster Authority, or stealing the CDA's tech for a cockney criminal syndicate called the Jackal.

Yet, despite this cornucopia of personality, Splash Damage seemed to undergo a crisis of confidence during *Dirty Bomb*'s development. The game's name was changed to the less-characterful *Extraction*, and then switched back again. *Brink*'s parkour was reduced to a simple, wall-kicking double jump. And the purity of *Enemy Territory*'s class system was diluted, so that any role could tackle an engineer's objectives – reducing the need for team cooperation.

It was a capitulation to the mainstream, and painfully, it didn't work. Half a decade on, *Dirty Bomb* pulls in just a smattering of players on Steam each day – while *Overwatch* draws crowds with the payload objectives and distinct player roles that first won Splash Damage acclaim.

ABOUT-TURN

The studio remains a respected multiplayer-for-hire developer, working on *Batman: Arkham Origins* and the last two *Gears* shooters. But these online components of



ABOVE: Dirty Bum. Hur hur. No wonder they changed the name.

A CAPITULATION TO THE MAINSTREAM, AND PAINFULLY, IT DIDN'T WORK

solo games have short shelf lives, with support and servers expectedly dwindling a few years after launch. Salvation has come instead from a surprising quarter – the studio's experiments with turn-based tactics.

The promise of the mobile-first *RAD Soldiers*, a Splash Damage side project from 2012, came to full fruition in last year's *Gears Tactics*.

A respectable competitor to *XCOM*, *Gears Tactics* captures the aggressive spirit of shooters in a traditionally polite genre. Offence is the smartest defence: executing Grubs grants your units extra moves, and

there's a knack to chaining kills so that turns extend way beyond their natural lifespan. As in *Enemy Territory*, each unit is highly specialised. Best of all, *Gears Tactics*' ballistic modelling ensures that stray bullets catch unintended targets, muddying the ruleset with thrilling unpredictability. In other words, it's a true Splash Damage game. Once an FPS developer, always an FPS developer. ■

The marvellous mechs of *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars*.



PREVIEW





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBCDEVELOPER
UbisoftPUBLISHER
In houseLINK
bit.ly/3fPSZjpRAINBOW SIX
EXTRACTION

We played Ubisoft's slower, more methodical take on *Left 4 Dead*

It feels like ages ago that *Rainbow Six Extraction* was announced, but I just Googled it and it turns out that was only 2019? Time flies in quarantine, especially for a game originally titled *Quarantine*. A year before that, Ubisoft proved that a co-op zombie game based on the PvP-focused *Rainbow Six Siege* could actually work, with a fun side mode.

That mode was called Outbreak, and it only lasted for a couple of weeks before it disappeared forever. At the time, the fun three-mission campaign gave us major *Left 4 Dead* vibes. Ubisoft absorbed feedback, created an entirely new team within its Montreal studio, and got to work to flesh it out.

After a few hours playing *Extraction*, I'm starting to think it's actually the anti-*Left 4 Dead*. It has safe rooms, special infected types, and scarce medkits, but *Extraction's* pacing is completely different from the chaos I'm used to in co-op zombie slaying.

The mission our group of three played was an almost leisurely stroll with small bursts of action throughout. I never encountered that classic scenario where I'm hurrying down a hallway with 23 zombies (technically aliens called 'parasites' in *Extraction*) behind me in a full-sprint to eat my flesh. I did, however, have to pull Sledge out of a gooey alien cocoon, dodge fleshy scab growths that ambushed me from the ceiling, and trudge through black ooze that can coat every inch of a room. Gross, in a good way.

EXTRACTION'S SLOWER PACE
CAN BE CHALKED UP TO ITS
SOURCE MATERIAL

SNAIL'S PACE

Extraction's slower pace can be chalked up to its source material: *Rainbow Six Siege*. Like *Siege*, the default speed here is a light jog that's significantly slower than most FPSes. The speed is naturally suited for *Siege's* close-quarters shootouts, but it's a bit harder to get used to in *Extraction*. Normal parasite enemies are about as weak as *L4D* zombies, but they don't bunch up into hordes. I'd often find one or two in a room standing still waiting patiently to be shot in the head. It also seemed like it was possible to clear out an area by destroying the parasite-spawning nests scattered around. I was surprised at how often I felt relatively safe in this dangerous environment.

So, when exactly is it not safe? That can depend on how well you manage that black ooze I mentioned earlier, the Sprawl. Nests are constantly pumping out the stuff and standing in it slows you to a crawl, making you an easier target for enemies. I got caught up in the ooze a few times and was promptly pummeled by the basic meandering parasites that had given me no trouble before. My group

ended up failing our second mission trying to protect a node as a bunch of parasites pushed us from every direction. We hadn't seen this objective type yet and it had been quiet up to that point, so the sudden aggression caught us all off-guard.

There are seven special parasite types that can appear in a given mission. *L4D* veterans will recognise the bloater-type zombie that wants to blow up in your face, but the other ones we fought were more original – a spiker that shoots needles, a trapper that can also blind players, and a roter that sends out slowing area-of-effect attacks from far away.

It was hard to tell from only a few playthroughs of one mission, but I got the sense that these 'special' parasites are pretty common spawns that might even appear as often as a standard meandering parasite. And similar to *Siege*, operators are fragile. You only need to sustain damage for a few seconds to be near death. Instead of my HP chipping away after a dozen swipes from *L4D* zombies, I'd be down after only a couple of scrapes.

Luck also has a small part in a mission's difficulty. Enemy types, mission

PLAYED
IT

Rainbow Six Extraction



objectives, and where those objectives appear are procedurally generated. Every map is divided into three 'sub-maps' with layouts that don't change, but the order that they appear in your mission will – the lab environment our mission started in could be the last area in your run, for instance. The only variable that really mattered to our group were the objectives themselves, which are picked from a pool of 12. Sometimes we had to destroy nests while parasites continuously spawned, or lure a giant Tank-type alien into a trap, and one time we had to carry special foam injectors capsules into an alien node to foam it up and destroy it. Completing all three objectives in each of the sub-maps nets the most experience points, but you do have the option to extract early.

Extracting early ensures that your operator doesn't go down, which you really want to avoid thanks to *Extraction's* 'MIA' mechanic. Lost allies are captured by the parasite and can't be played again until you've rescued them in a subsequent mission (that's the 'gooey alien cocoon' I mentioned earlier). Health also carries over, meaning that a Doc that survived the mission with 10 HP has to sit out a few missions before he's back to full health.

It's hard to tell how this system will play out once the whole game is in front of me, but I really don't like it so far. Locking out operators struck me as an arbitrary punishment that didn't meaningfully change the game – not having Sledge or Doc doesn't mean getting around the map is more challenging or some enemies are harder to counter, it's just an inconvenience to have fewer options on the character select screen. It also sounds annoying to have to repeat the same cocoon extraction mission anytime I or one of my squadmates has an operator in need of saving. Maybe losing a character will be rarer than I'm projecting, but we ran into plenty of trouble at our beginner/intermediate difficulty.

OLD FACES, NEW TRICKS

Speaking of operators, all of *Extraction's* come straight from *Siege*. We had access to a pool of nine: Alibi, Finka, Sledge, Lion, Doc, Pulse, Hibana, Vigil and Ela. It's clear that Ubi has only plucked operators

whose gadgets make some sort of sense in a PvE environment. Doc's healing pistol, Sledge's hammer and Ela's Grzmot mines handle exactly the same as they do in *Siege* with minor tweaks.

In a few cases, the function of a gadget has had to be changed entirely. Vigil's scrambler gadget usually allows him to appear invisible on cameras, but in *Extraction* he becomes undetectable to parasites temporarily. Instead of detecting heartbeats, Pulse's cardiac sensor can sniff out nests through walls. I've been excited to see how Ubi will incorporate these gadgets into a co-op game since *Extraction's* announcement, though I was disappointed at how superfluous my operator abilities were in action. In *Siege*, gadgets give every operator a distinct role on a team – Hibana can open crucial reinforced walls, Pulse can surveil opponents through anything, Alibi can play tricks with decoys. *Extraction* turns all of these multifaceted tools into somewhat minor perks. Doc's dinky healing output is trounced by proper medkits, Vigil's scrambler is a simplistic invisibility cloak and Sledge has very few reasons to sledge anything.

Siege's impressive destruction engine seems to take a backseat in general here. Most rooms have at least one destructible wall, but breaching wasn't really encouraged or required to get through the mission. I'm interested to see what other types of variables can be thrown in to make missions feel unique. There are so many fundamental unknowns that I'll inform how replayable the game is.

Right now, the best thing *Extraction* has going for it is that I already know it's a good FPS. Armed with *Siege's* precise hitboxes and gun feel, *Extraction* is stepping out of the gate with a major gameplay advantage that a smaller scale co-op shooter like *Back 4 Blood* can't match. *Extraction* feels expensive, which is only one aspect of the game, but is very important in an FPS that you're supposed to play over and over again.

It feels weird to play a game that looks, sounds, and feels just like *Siege* and yet ignores some of its best qualities. Still, it's understandable that a completely different team would adopt *Siege's* framework and take it in a different direction. I'm just not sure if that direction is particularly exciting yet. The impressive objective and enemy variety is a promising start, at least. *Rainbow Six Extraction* is expected to finally launch later this year.

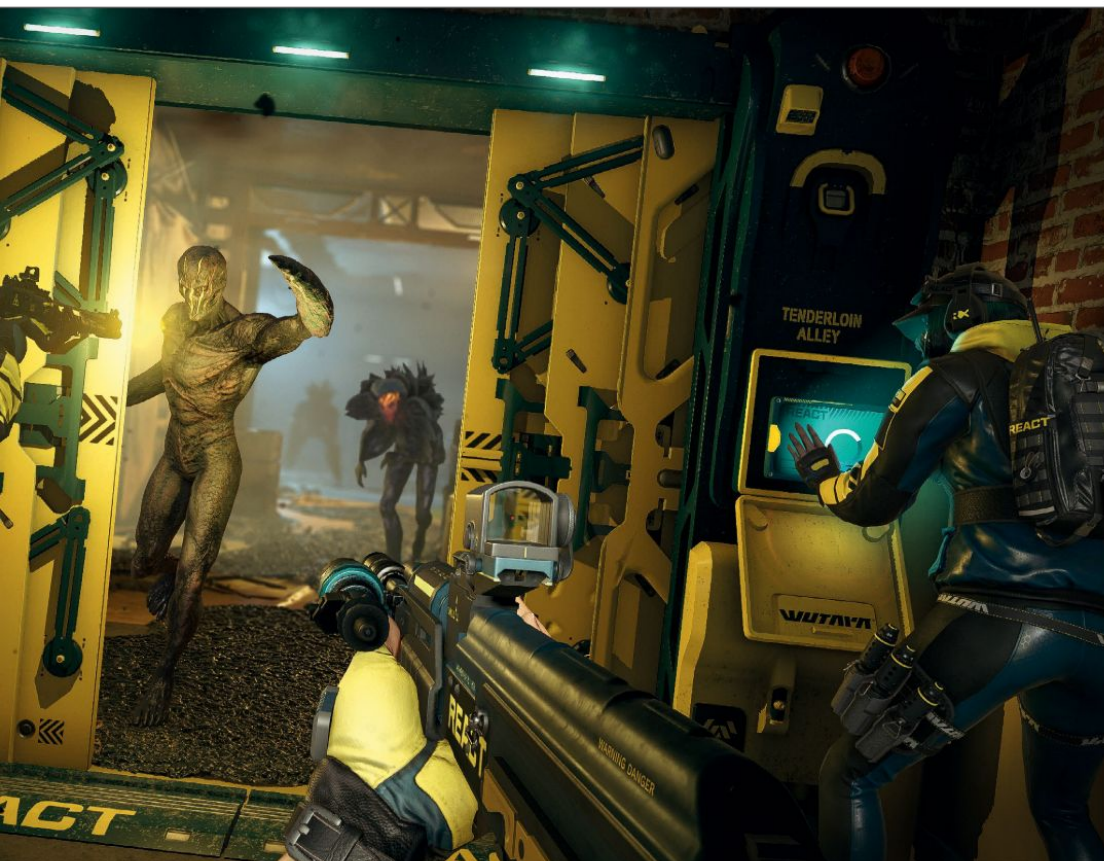
Morgan Park



Guns are equipped with a UV flashlight that highlights weak points through walls.



WE RAN INTO PLENTY OF TROUBLE AT OUR BEGINNER/INTERMEDIATE DIFFICULTY



ABOVE: *Extraction* is a three-player game, though you can play with two or alone.

LEFT: Every parasite has weak spots that can basically instakill them.

Deathloop



ABOVE: Colt's rival Juliana looking extremely cool.

RIGHT: The enemy henchmen look like weird painted mannequins.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
September 14DEVELOPER
ArkanePUBLISHER
BethesdaLINK
deathloop.com

DEATHLOOP

This time-loop shooter is like *Dishonored* turned up to 11

Deathloop is the next big game from Arkane, the studio behind *Dishonored* and *Prey*. It has a lot in common with those games, and the immersive sim genre in general. You're presented with a varied toolset and a dense, multi-layered world, and encouraged to experiment with reactive, open-ended systems to achieve your goals.

But *Deathloop*'s premise sets it apart: you play as an assassin stuck in a time loop who must figure out a way to kill eight targets in one cycle. This is the only way hero Colt can free himself. Think Groundhog Day, but directed by Luc Besson and set in the 1960s.

Deathloop takes place entirely on Blackreef, a mysterious island where time endlessly repeats. Taking advantage of this temporal anomaly, a group of self-proclaimed Visionaries are using the island as a way to gain eternal life and live it free of consequence.

And it's this ghoulish crew that you have to assassinate. But to make this task more difficult, each target has an army of henchmen, the island is full of security systems, and when you die, the loop resets and you have to start all over again.

Well, that's not strictly true. At first, a cycle resetting means Colt is back to square one. But later in the game he finds a loophole that lets him retain some of his abilities. Also, any intel you uncover during a loop – say, a door code or a target's location – is retained too. So over time, Colt gradually becomes more powerful,

and his knowledge of Blackreef and the habits of its residents grows.

In action, *Deathloop* looks incredible. Colt has the athleticism of *Dishonored*'s Emily and Corvo, able to spring between rooftops and use an ability similar to Blink to teleport across short distances. But instead of relying on a sword and a clunky old pistol, Colt has a vast array of exotic firearms to choose from, making *Deathloop* much more of an FPS – and a deliciously stylish, fast-paced one at that.

FAST AND LOOP

In a hands-off demo I watch an Arkane developer slide between cover, teleport around enemies to confuse them, and blow them away theatrically with a bright green shotgun. The energy is unreal – and that's from just watching it being played.

Fans of the *Dishonored* series will find one of the game's targets particularly interesting. Aleksis 'The Wolf' Dorsey is throwing a masquerade ball at his mansion, and I'm immediately reminded of the first *Dishonored*'s standout mission, Lady Boyle's Last Party.

I watch a developer play a slice of this mission, teleporting across the rooftops of an abandoned old town on the outskirts of the mansion, dropping enemies with a sniper rifle or up-close with a knife, before

infiltrating the mansion itself to locate The Wolf. It's classic *Dishonored* stealth, but faster and more aggressive.

Killing The Wolf earns Colt an ability that lets him throw enemies around like ragdolls – and you're gonna need all the powers you can get when Juliana starts showing up. There's another assassin on Blackreef, and her objective is the opposite of yours: keeping the loop intact. How? By killing you. She'll appear at random, controlled by another player if you have PVP enabled, and can disguise herself as enemies to screw with you. This is an imaginative approach to multiplayer and I can't wait to see more of it in action.

Arkane is keeping the immersive sim dream alive, and this is a thrilling, creative take on the genre that is absolutely brimming with potential. You can break the loop yourself when, barring any further delays, *Deathloop* is released on PC on September 14.

Andy Kelly



You can explore the island at different times of day.

WHEN YOU DIE, THE LOOP RESETS AND YOU HAVE TO START ALL OVER AGAIN

The Ascent



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
July 29

DEVELOPER
Neon Giant

PUBLISHER
Curve Digital

LINK
curve-digital.com

THE ASCENT

A brutal action RPG set in a grimy cyberpunk city

Every day, thousands of people land on the planet Veles looking for a new life. And if they can't afford the trip, they pay by signing their lives away to the corporations who rule it. These unfortunate souls, one of whom you play as in *The Ascent*, become corporate slaves called Indents.

You work for the largest mega-corporation on Veles, the Ascent Group, in a bustling, overcrowded city squeezed into a colossal tower called an arcology. Beings from all over the galaxy inhabit this cramped, dystopian metropolis, which is, of course, rife with crime and corruption. And it's here where you make a living as a mercenary for hire.

The game begins with you creating a character, then riding an elevator down into the depths of the city to repair a faulty system in a garbage facility. *The Ascent* is a top-down action RPG with a focus on ranged combat, and I get my first taste of this when I'm attacked by the creatures who call this facility home. They attack from all sides, forcing me to back-pedal and hammer the trigger on a weedy little pistol to drive them back.

The shooting is great. I play with a gamepad, aiming with the right stick, moving with the left, giving it the feel of a twin-stick shooter. Blowing the ferals away feels chunky, brutal and satisfying. It's also a stunning looking game. The environments are dense and cluttered, and the moody real-time lighting is incredibly atmospheric. As I explore the

facility, massive, clunky, insect-like robots scuttle around recycling piles of trash. I'm frequently stopped in my tracks by how amazingly *rich* the setting feels.

UP AND COMING

When I complete my job, I return to the city above and learn that the Ascent Group has suddenly gone bankrupt, leaving the entire arcology in a state of uncertainty. The city acts as a hub where I can buy weapons, chat with NPCs, and pick up missions. Again, I'm blown away by the game's environments. This is one of the most convincingly crowded, messy, oppressive cyberpunk cities I've explored in a game, and I love the art direction.

Realising Ascent's collapse will soon result in riots, food shortages, and other existential threats to the arcology, a local mob boss, Poone, has a plan. He's going to meet with the city's other bosses, ask them to forget their age-old rivalries, and propose a partnership. But he needs security, which is where you come in. Before I set off, I spend some time in the city, talking to the colourful citizens. Some people are worried about the future of the corp-less arcology. Others are looking forward to the chaos.

I head towards the location of the meet. Along the way I run into criminals looking for a fight, and experience some more of that punchy gun combat. Now I have a machine-gun and a shotgun. Against armed enemies, movement is important. I strafe wildly around the environment, firing streams of bullets at my attackers. They drop loot and I level up, getting stronger as my body count rises, which gives *The Ascent* the feel of *Diablo*, but without randomised levels.

At the meet, things go south. Two heavy-set aliens swinging giant hammers smash through a wall and ambush me. This is a frantic and difficult battle, made worse by the fact that the hammer brothers are accompanied by dozens of gun-toting bodyguards. I die a *lot*, but every enemy I take out before I fall makes me a little stronger, and with each attempt I get closer to finishing the pair off. I've only spent a couple of hours with *The Ascent*, but I love what I've played and I'm eager to see more of its dark cyberpunk setting when it's released on July 29.

Andy Kelly

THE MOODY REAL-TIME LIGHTING IS INCREDIBLY ATMOSPHERIC

The game has a great sense of scale, despite the top-down view.



ABOVE: You can play alone or with up to three friends in co-op.

LEFT: Local mob boss Poone makes me an offer.



King's Bounty II



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
August 24

DEVELOPER
1C Entertainment

PUBLISHER
Deep Silver

LINK
kingsbounty2.com

KING'S BOUNTY II

Mutiny on the bounty

It came as a shock to open *King's Bounty II* and discover it had switched to a scaled-up 3D world. The compressed, cartoonish fantasy of the previous games has been blown up to realistic proportions, and you can now hop off your horse and saunter between its traditional turn-based battles on foot.

All in all, the result is an odd game, sitting in the borderlands between the RPG and strategy genres. I've played ten hours or so of a preview build, sticking my toe into all manner of sidequests and sending dozens of humans, animals, and monsters to their doom in battle. I like it. I'm pretty sure, although I'm saddened that a lot of the more fantastical elements of *King's Bounty: The Legend* appear to have been sanded away.

Speaking of which, this is the belated direct sequel to the 2008 tactical RPG in which you could marry a zombie – or, if you preferred, a frog. Just one bonkers sidequest in a game brimming with fairy tale weirdness. A game that played a bit like *Heroes of Might & Magic*, as you roamed a fantasy world gathering resources and units, before employing those units in turn-based battles.

I won't bang on about the story of this sequel, as I found it stilted and a little dull, but it begins with your character being let out of jail to run an errand for the prince, and that's as good a reason to start adventuring as any. There are three characters to choose from – a warrior, mage, or paladin – although you only ever

support your troops from the sidelines in the *King's Bounty* series, flinging spells or magical missiles onto the battlefield.

But while they do the fighting, your role, as in the previous games, is to traipse around the world, resolving troubles and gathering resources and additional units for your army. It's a beautifully rendered setting, particularly after you escape the wintry tutorial area and find yourself in the more varied Crown Lands, which feel huge and non-linear, but without quite reaching the daunting scale of an open world.

I'm a fan of these more intimate, hand-crafted game settings, although the world of *King's Bounty II* is far more static than in something like *The Witcher 3*. It's beautiful, but inert: there's no day-night cycle, while enemies are restricted to a sprinkling of bespoke encounters, either initiated during cutscenes or bedded down in the world, where they are cordoned off behind big glowing barriers. If you cross the threshold, you'll trigger combat, although you can always retreat if you don't feel ready to take them on.

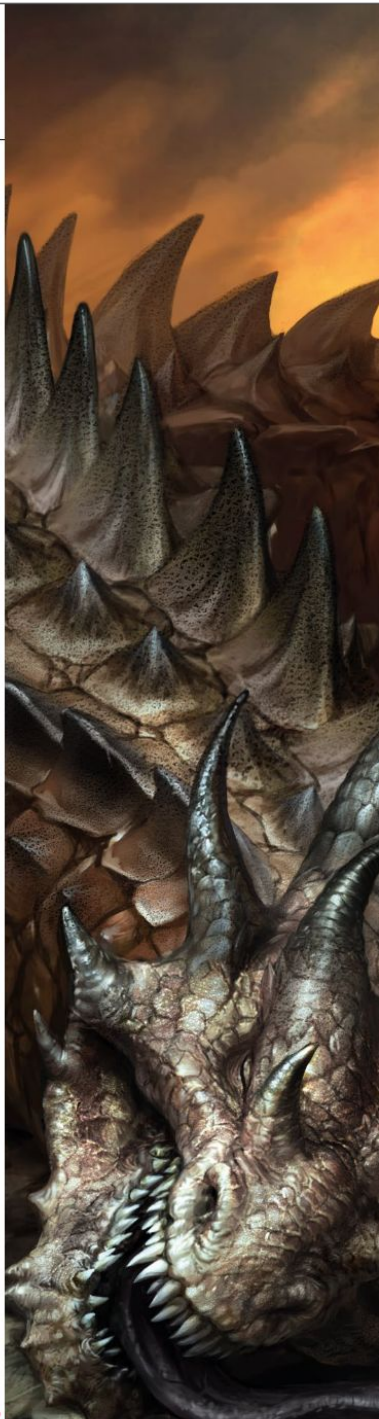
MEAN GIRL

Once I had arrived in the Crown Lands, I spent most of my time collecting sidequests, which seemed to crop up pretty much everywhere I turned. If the sheer number was

impressive – and I spent my time in just one corner of the map, with swathes remaining unexplored – then I'm less enthusiastic about the quality of the quests themselves. They were strangely curt and matter-of-fact, as if someone had taken notes from *The Witcher 3*, while neglecting to imbue the stories with any great humour or emotional depth.

It didn't help that the character I picked was a persistent jerk to everyone she met, and that the game contains no dialogue options so I could attempt to steer her in friendlier directions. Still, at least the sidequests took me to some interesting and attractive parts of the world, from the clay pit and workshop where golems are made, to an eerie, abandoned village sitting in the shadow of a hill.

From what I've seen of the game, I think it will suffer when compared to modern open-world RPGs, for which a 'living, breathing world' is important. However, if you approach it from another



THE SIDEQUESTS TOOK ME TO SOME INTERESTING PARTS OF THE WORLD



PREVIEW

King's Bounty II

RIGHT: It wouldn't be a fantasy game without giant bolts of magical energy.

BELOW: One of the heroes you can pick is played by the voice of Geralt, Doug Cockle.





There are three playable characters, including Aivar the warrior.



angle – as an ambitious reworking of the core *King's Bounty* concept – there's more to be hopeful about.

Remember those enemies I mentioned, the ones waiting behind their glowing barriers? It's a feature common to games with strategic maps, and I admire developer 1C Entertainment for using it in a more grounded setting, even at the risk of undermining the sacred immersion. There's no time pressure to engage with baddies, nor any risk of a surprise attack as you serenely wander through this fantasy world. But the absolute *best* part of the glowing barriers is that the bandits or skeletons, bears or elemental creatures will scamper out and waggle their weapons as you approach the border, like playground bullies in a Beano comic strip.

When you *do* choose to engage in combat, you're told exactly which enemies to expect, and how strong they are compared to your current party. In *King's Bounty*, you hire nameless soldiers to do your dirty work, including human swordsmen and archers, beasts such as wolves and bears, and even undead skeletons and ghouls.

While previous *Bounty* battles took place on tiny hex-based grids, here those grids have been expanded, and embellished with different levels of elevation, and various line-of-sight blocking obstacles. You position your units, and then take turns with the enemy to whittle down everyone's health bars, while your hero chips in occasionally with a powerful spell. The game is good at informing you about the potential outcomes of your actions, so I would often chew on turns for ages, trying to minimise my losses the best I could.

HARD TIMES

If every member of a unit perishes then you'll lose them forever and have to swap in units from your reserve, or else track down a recruiter to buy replacements. Balance fixes have been promised for the finished game, and I hope they apply to the combat, as the difficulty ramped up sharply after I entered the Crown Lands. I scoured the world pretty thoroughly for encounters that would train me up for the harder battles, but even after fighting

weaker groups of enemies, I would often come away bearing significant losses.

I found surprisingly few battles during my time with *King's Bounty II*, either coming upon them out in the wilderness, or triggering combat during quests. Sidequests generally contained just one battle, although these were tricky encounters that required some thoughtful tinkering to win. Probably the most important decision in a battle will happen just before you start it: which units are you going to take into combat with you? You can only bring five, and they span a broad range of strengths and abilities, from the snarling attack dogs that can perform nifty hit-and-run attacks, to the iron golems that hit hard but move slowly.

You might now be wondering how humans, elemental constructs, thieves and skeletons get on with each other, and the answer, unsurprisingly, is: they don't. There are four general classes of unit: Order, Anarchy, Power, and Finesse, and their morale will drop if you thoughtlessly mix them all together. But even aside from that consideration, just five units is a *hard* limit, and it can be difficult to know which ones to bring to each particular rumble. I'm hoping the finished game will make some effort to educate in this regard, as I never felt like I was doing much more than just muddling through the combat.

As I put down *King's Bounty II* – my exploration curtailed on several fronts by battles I wasn't powerful, or clever, enough to beat – I was left scratching my head at what I made of its peculiar genre collision. The combat is thoughtful, an expansion of a solid battle system that makes strong use of the newly 3D backdrops, although it does feel curiously separate from the exploration phase of the game. I liked being able to prepare for encounters, and begin them at my leisure. However, these far-flung fights made the intervening world feel, well, like wasted space, particularly when the vast majority of the loot I scrounged from my rather thorough exploration of it just consisted of useless but sellable trinkets.

At the time of writing, we're still over two months from release, so there's still a *little* time for these two halves to be jammed together with a bit more elegance, and for the unforgiving tactical battles to be introduced a tad more gently into the game. And, while it's at it, if 1C could bung in a bit more whimsy – it could let us marry, oh let's say, a ghost – that'd be the icing on the cake.

Tom Sykes

IF EVERY MEMBER OF A UNIT PERISHES, THEN YOU'LL LOSE THEM FOREVER

Tactical Breach Wizards



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBCDEVELOPER
Suspicious DevelopmentsPUBLISHER
In-houseLINK
bit.ly/3oxpyoY

TACTICAL BREACH WIZARDS

Police with spells take on the druid mafia

So far, everything is going according to plan. My partner and I are scoping out a mafia cargo ship with the mission of extracting a hostage. All that stands between us and success is a gang of druids armed to the teeth with guns, ammo, and nasty spells.

It's a high-stakes operation but we breeze through the first string of cabins with no problem. But, after bursting into the main cargo hold and immobilising the first couple of targets, I'm left with a difficult choice. Take out the Elder Shrublord with an M4 aimed at the hostage, or save my Chronomancer teammate who's face-to-face with a terrifying spider monster? No matter what actions I make, it's impossible to do both and I'm paralysed with indecision. Who decided to give guns to all these wizards anyway?

That would be Tom Francis, the creator of turn-based strategy game *Tactical Breach Wizards* (previously behind both *Gunpoint* and *Heat Signature*, and, in the interests of full disclosure, a former PC Gamer writer). In this world, wizards have replaced their robes and staves with modern-day tactical gear. Armed with guns, gadgets, and spells, it's your job to clear rooms filled with supernatural thugs.

I'm intrigued by *Tactical Breach Wizard's* particular fantasy fusion. The first set of missions introduces you to Jen, a storm witch who doubles as a private investigator and has the ability to control electricity. And Zan, a retired time-

travelling Navy Seer who has the ability to see into the future.

I love the designs of these characters, like Jen's collapsible broomstick that she carries on her back and the wand she has stuffed in the band of her witch's hat. With Zan, there's something funny about seeing an old wizard decked out with a rifle and camo gear, like Gandalf's been reincarnated in the SAS.

The duo join forces when they realise their investigatory interests overlap. Zan is looking for an ex-special forces colleague who has ties to a case Jen is investigating. The two are old friends but their reunion is not a time for celebration. The station is being raided by black ops forces and the two get caught up in the fray, leading to a string of levels where you have to take out the squadron with your arcane abilities.

SPELLS TROUBLE

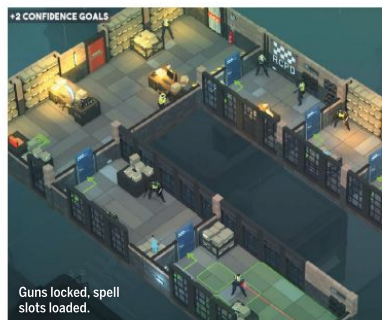
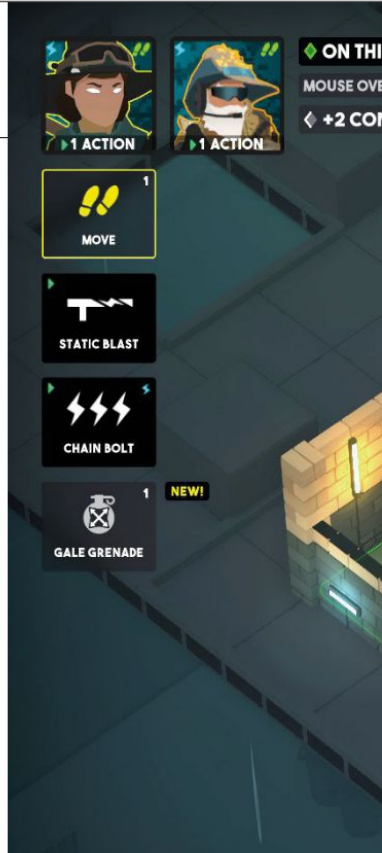
Blasting away the first couple of enemies is an easy enough job, but there are much beefier enemies equipped with riot gear waiting later down the line. Instead of brute-forcing your way through levels, controlling the space with some strategic spellcasting is key. There's an emphasis on trying to move each target around the space to take them out as efficiently as possible. If all else fails, you can always just blast an enemy through a window.

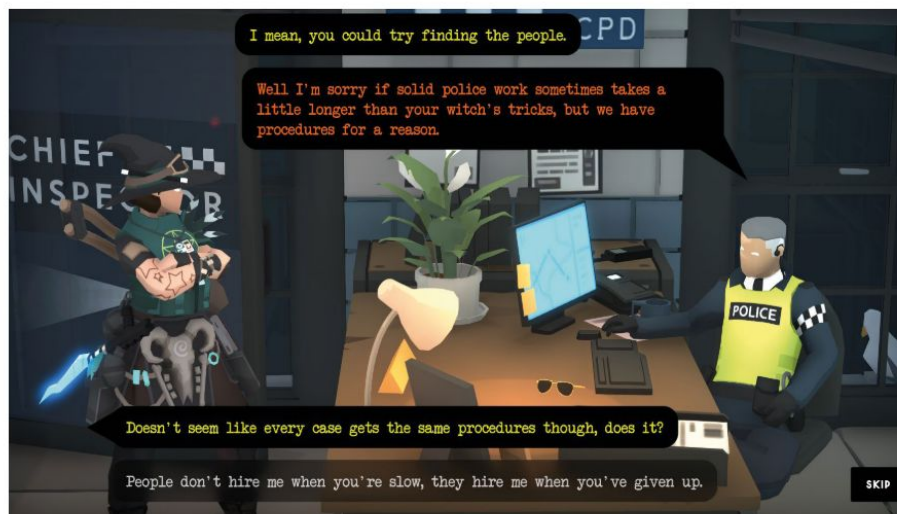
You can also switch between characters during your turn, and are also allowed to undo moves and mistakes, letting you try out different combinations of approach. The game is pretty flexible in that regard and makes learning strategies easier since you can test them out before committing to them. Having the ability to rewind removes some of the challenge, but that's exactly the point – this is clever turn-based strategy, but it's also intended to be accessible, and to have as much of a focus on the storytelling as the tactical action combat.

It's still rough around the edges, being still early in development, but *Tactical Breach Wizard* is well on its way to being a fascinating modern-fantasy adventure. The world-building and story are the stars so far, but the combat has plenty of potential too, and I'm excited to see it all come together for release.

Rachel Watts

CONTROLLING THE SPACE WITH SOME STRATEGIC SPELLCASTING IS KEY

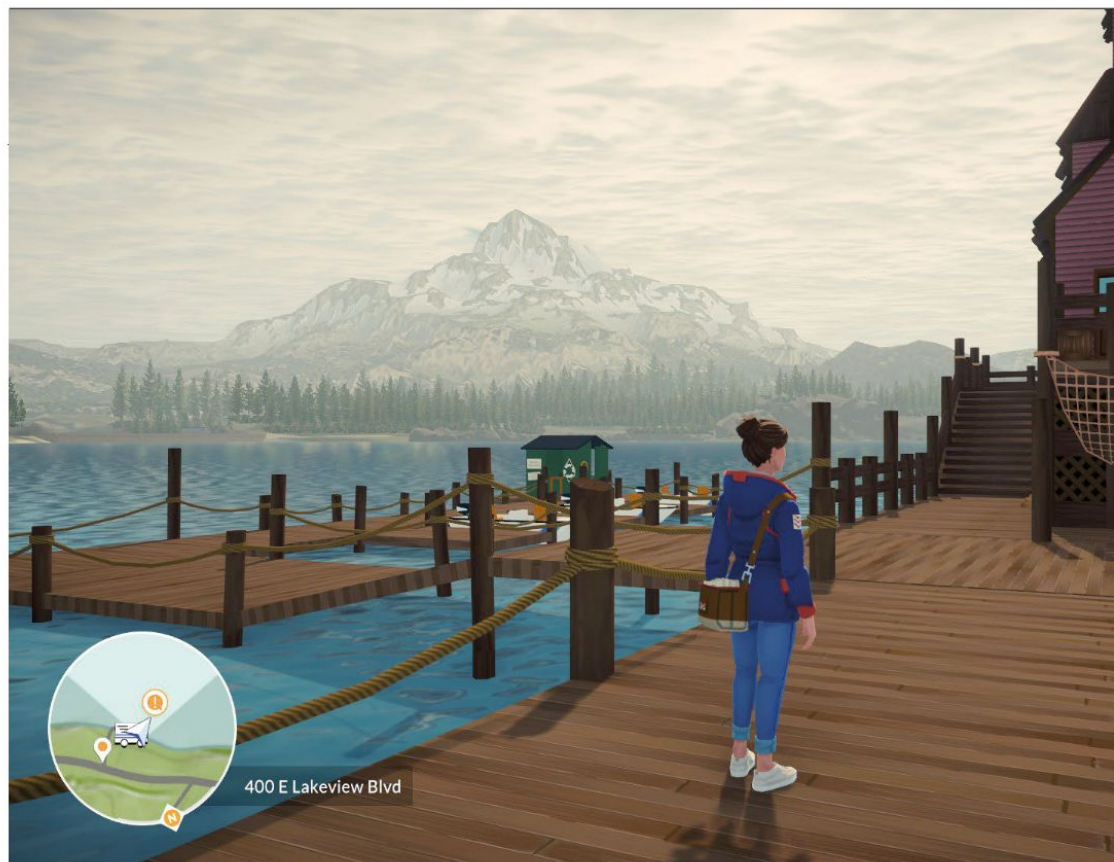




ABOVE: Just a young witch trying to stand up to the Man.

LEFT: Dammit detective, you're a loose wand!

Lake



ABOVE: These visuals almost make you actually want to go outside. Almost.

RIGHT: I don't think 102 will be happy with their jury duty summons.

FAR RIGHT: I definitely didn't shake this box before delivering it.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
SummerDEVELOPER
GamiousPUBLISHER
Whitethorn DigitalLINK
whitethorndigital.com/lake

LAKE

Deliver the post in cosy, small-town Oregon

The postal service was much simpler back in the 1980s. No PS5s being snatched from porches, no looming threat of Amazon delivery drones, and no aggressive push for a speedier service. Gamious' indie driving sim *Lake* takes us back to that time.

It's set in the Pacific Northwest, where you deliver mail, talk to the locals, and, well, not much else. *Lake* is chill, has lovely visuals, and basically is right up my street.

You play as Meredith Weiss, a corporate computer whizz who has taken a break from her city job to spend two weeks as a postal worker in her hometown of Providence Oaks, Oregon. I say town, but that's a stretch. Providence Oaks has a tiny population, barely 100 people, many of whom have grown up and never left since Meredith's departure 22 years ago.

Delivering the post in this sleepy town is easy enough. You start every morning at the post office and drive to each location on your list, delivering the right parcels and letters to each address. Using the mini-map in the bottom corner to keep track of the surrounding area, you drive up to a house, hop out of your van, and put the letters in the mailbox. It's really that easy. If it's a package, you'll first need to fetch it out the back of the van and hand it to the person directly.

You really can't go wrong delivering the post. If you somehow walk up to the wrong postbox, the little icon letting you deliver the letter doesn't pop up. There's

no time limit or a specific order for your deliveries, you just amble along in your wagon until all the tasks are done.

Providence Oaks isn't just a suburban neighbourhood – you'll be visiting all kinds of places. There's a worn-down motel, rusty garage, faded video store, and the huge lake that the whole town centres around. Stopping off at these locations surrounded by Oregon's peaceful wilderness is the best part of *Lake*. There are picturesque mountains and hundreds of pine trees that envelope the roads.

It's not just Oregon's wilderness that charms me – the van feels like it has its own personality too. It's a huge hulking thing that can only go 30 mph, and you can feel its weight as you drive around corners. It also has a radio which you need to bang on the dashboard to make work, and it can only tune into a single station that's partial to sweet country ballads about heartbreak.

SPECIAL DELIVERY

Getting to know the residents in Providence Oaks is another key part of the experience. There's a lot of personalities in this small town, like the cranky lady who owns the grocery store, the hermit who lives on his own in the forest, and the kooky granny with 12 cats. It's a town that runs at a slower pace than Meredith is used to.

Lake also touches upon Meredith's past decisions about leaving the town and what she should do about her future. Did she make the right call leaving this seemingly serene place for a high-pressure job where she's forced to work overtime constantly and deal with a huge pile of work because her boss, Steve, won't do it himself? It feels like the game is heading in the direction where you'll need to make a life-changing decision for your burned out protagonist.

But there's not really a big pretentious story here, *Lake* is about small-town life and the feeling of returning home after being away for a long time. I'm looking forward to more chill driving and postal work in *Lake* when it releases later this summer. I'm also desperate for Meredith to quit her city job, tell Steve to shove it, and move back home, even if it's only for a little bit while she figures out her future.

Rachel Watts

THERE ARE PICTURESQUE MOUNTAINS AND HUNDREDS OF PINE TREES



The Hand of Merlin



NEED TO KNOW

EXPET TO PAY
£19

DEVELOPER
Room-C Games, Croteam

PUBLISHER
Versus Evil

LINK
croteam.com/hand-of-merlin

THE HAND OF MERLIN

Gawain, give this tactical
roguelike a look

I like how matter-of-factly you acquire the Holy Grail in *The Hand of Merlin*. Here's this famously elusive artefact, and it's just handed to you at the start of the game. Your goal – under the guidance of the wizard Merlin – is to bring the cup to Jerusalem, and so end a demonic apocalypse.

King Arthur is dead, and the world is on the brink of ruin. Or I should say *worlds*, as this storybook roguelike has narrative reasoning for its randomised patchwork of story chapters, turn-based battles, and permadeath. Each run takes place in a new dimension, where a different ruler sits at Camelot, and different events lie in waiting on its handsome maps of mythical Britain, France, and beyond.

You might travel to a location and happen across a friendly inn, or bandits waiting to attack a town. In each event you'll gamble on choices and live with the outcomes, perhaps triggering a tactical battle in the process. *Merlin* splits its attention pretty evenly between fighting and reading, with the latter diving deep into Arthurian lore. Yes the purple corruption monsters are a bit of an odd addition, but I enjoyed starting a new run and seeing how *this* Albion was different.

The fighting is good, but there's a richness to the text that this scuffling against men and monsters doesn't capture. Early Access may flesh them out, but battles need to be richer if they want to feel at home in Arthurian Britain.

Tom Sykes

**IN EACH EVENT YOU'LL
GAMBLE ON CHOICES AND
LIVE WITH THE OUTCOMES**

1 While the maps' geography doesn't change, the contents of each encounter node do. Handily, you're given hints about what to expect at each node, so you can plan your route across the region while making sure you have enough supplies, gold, and mana for your team.

2 There are set locations dotted around, including towns where you can upgrade your equipment, buy magical relics, or heal your team. There is also Stonehenge, where I fought a rare but beautiful battle against some nefarious bandits.

3 The main thrust of the game takes place inside a book, as lightly illustrated chapters complete with choices and, occasionally, breakout battles. After about seven hours of playing – much of that in the first region, a mythical Britain – I did notice some repetition.

4 Every time your party perishes you'll restart the game in Albion, in a parallel universe. A weakened Merlin is pulling the strings behind the scenes, hoping that one of the countless timelines will defeat the corruption that's eating the multiverse.

5 Battlefields can be difficult to parse. The main culprits are the corruption monsters, who are so uniformly purple they can be tricky to make out against the backgrounds. Sometimes there's poisonous ooze on the ground, but you need to squint to see it.

6 There isn't much persistence between runs, but one thing that does carry over is this cube-shaped spellbook, which unlocks as you acquire magical doodads in each world. Unlocked spells can be taken into every game, although casting them requires mana – a precious rare resource.







ABOVE: Travel between locations happens on an overworld map.

RIGHT: Items can be traded with merchants for food and loot.





TRAVEL INFO	
FORTUNES ON LOCATION	
SHELTER	Opportunity to rest in relative safety
UNKNOWN	Encounter: unknown
MIST	Opportunity: reduces Presence by 1.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPET TO PAY
£20

DEVELOPER
Ludomotion

PUBLISHER
Big Sugar

LINK
bit.ly/2Ta3l53

UNEXPLORED 2

The most innovative adventure game I've played in years

Unexplored 2 comes so close to nailing the sense of adventure I got the first time I read *The Lord of the Rings*. It's technically a roguelike, but instead of being trapped in a dungeon that reassembles itself into new configurations each time I die, I'm set loose into an expansive and enchanting fantasy world that is constantly in a state of flux.

To survive, I have to forage, fight, and talk my way through a gauntlet of different challenges. While it doesn't replicate the fun social dynamics of playing *Dungeons & Dragons* with a group of pals, it often feels like I'm playing a tabletop campaign uniquely crafted just for me.

That *Unexplored 2* channels *The Lord of the Rings* is definitely not an accident. I play as a pilgrim on a mission to destroy a powerful artefact called the Staff of Yendor. If I fail, the nefarious Empire and its vast armies will eventually steal it and use its powerful magic to aid in their global conquest.

Unlike other roguelikes, my attempts to destroy the Staff of Yendor don't happen in a vacuum. I still have to make a new character each time I die, but the world doesn't reset and randomise itself. Each death moves the clock forward a few years until the next Wayfarer rises up to complete this sacred task.

During those intervening years, I watch in fast-forward as the Empire's influence creeps across the continent, corrupting the land and making the journey more dangerous. Alliances between clans

strengthen or dissolve, and new quests replace old ones. Though the overworld map stays the same, the layout, enemies, and challenges found in each individual area I explore change.

Not everything changes, though. After two unsuccessful attempts, I managed to finally loot a magical sword from a dangerous cave. When this character (inevitably) dies, that powerful sword won't magically reappear back where I found it. If I'm lucky, some NPC will collect it and donate it to my next Wayfarer, but that doesn't seem to be a guarantee.

THERE AND BACK AGAIN

It's pretty common for modern roguelikes to soften the punishing loss of a character by having some measure of power carry forward, but I've never played one that does it in such an enthralling way. It's so much more meaningful than slowly accruing passive upgrades.

That's still just a smidgen of all the different systems at play, here. Travelling feels a lot like the *The Oregon Trail*, where I have to manage my dwindling resources and adapt to survive harsh climates and unforeseen setbacks like getting lost.

There's also a risk-reward mechanic where I can use the Staff of Yendor's powerful magics, but doing so will alert the Empire to my presence.

Though it's only in Early Access, *Unexplored 2* already has a lot of fun ideas that bleed together to create exciting stories out of each journey. Even so, don't feel pressured to buy in just yet – there's lots to do, but also lots of bugs and missing features.

Combat is fun, but just as often enemies will run around like headless chickens, or refuse to attack, or get stuck on level geometry. I have a glitch that duplicates my Ring of Haste each time I die (I now run very fast), and I've experienced nearly half a dozen soft locks when travelling to a new area. Thankfully, *Unexplored 2* has a generous autosave system so I never actually lost any progress. Glitches might be frequent, but they've never succeeded in sabotaging the fun I'm having. It's all pretty easy to ignore. The way *Unexplored 2* transforms the roguelike dungeon crawl into an epic road trip is just too damn exciting.

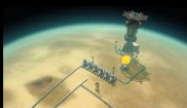
Steven Messner

HAS A LOT OF FUN IDEAS THAT BLEED TOGETHER TO CREATE EXCITING STORIES



Combat is all about careful timing and reading your enemy.

Dyson Sphere Program



NEED TO KNOW

EXPET TO PAY
£15

DEVELOPER
Youthcat Studio

PUBLISHER
Camera Games

LINK
bit.ly/3bHcrwn

DYSON SPHERE PROGRAM

The sky is nowhere near the limit

The journey from gathering resources using your bare hands to full mechanical automation is an arduous one. *Dyson Sphere Program*, where you're a single giant robot on an open-ended odyssey to automate resource extraction across an entire galaxy, gives me some armchair appreciation of that challenge.

This galactic factory simulator doesn't really give you pointers beyond boxouts with tiny fonts – a forgivable oversight given it's just a few months into Early Access. On the bright side, this meant that after some three hours of shoddy production chains and chomping on just enough trees to keep my mech spluttering along, the moment that I finally set up a fully automated research facility was a very memorable one.

There's no humanity in *Dyson Sphere Program*, and at first you could even be unsettled by its premise of hopping from planet to planet extracting their finite resources in service of a faceless motherbrain AI. You can spend countless hours on a single planet in *Dyson Sphere Program*, before researching the technology to seamlessly soar off to another planet in your pursuit of further resources. It's like the conveyor-belt puzzling of *Factorio* expanded to a vast procedural galaxy, with all the complexity and satisfaction that that would entail.

But for the love of the amoral AI superbrain, will the developers please give us a proper tutorial?

Robert Zak

IT'S LIKE THE PUZZLING OF FACTORIO EXPANDED TO A VAST PROCEDURAL GALAXY

1 Your early going will be spent wandering around your first planet, searching for basic fuel resources to keep your mech going and smashing up metal veins with your bare roboclaw. Find a nice spot with a good balance of resources and plonk your first mining machines there.

2 Once you have those mining machines down, you can take a moment to enjoy the orbiting planets in the sky. A key first step to automation is researching conveyor belts, which will be the arteries and veins of your mechanised empire.

3 With conveyor belts under your, erm, belt, things will get more complicated before they get simpler. You'll need to set up conveyors between buildings, sorters to pluck resources from and onto belts, and line everything up so that you can have multiple conveyors running.

4 Eventually, you'll have enough automation to self-generate research, stockpile materials, and have an endless fuel supply if you process coal into graphite. It's time to explore the rest of the planet to see what other precious minerals there are.

5 Once you've set up your production chains (which takes a while for a person like me who still struggles with rice-water ratios) and have some fuel to burn on your newly unlocked flying ability, take some time to appreciate the automation you've worked so tirelessly to achieve.

6 You can spend anywhere from a few to a few dozen hours on your home planet, but at some point it's time to pack a stash of fuels into your robotic bundle and seek solar systems new. Suck the sulphuric fumes from gas giants, scan new planets to settle and extract that galaxy for all its mineral worth.





Total War: Warhammer III

BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD



Battle in **TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER III** isn't just about winning or losing – it's a fight for survival

By Fraser Brown





fter five years, we're nearing the end of our journey through the battlefields of *Total War: Warhammer*. With the third and final game, we can at last play as and against the daemonic hordes of the Chaos gods, and for this conclusion Creative Assembly still has plenty of tricks up its sleeve. In my first foray into the latest game, I found myself facing an endless horde of these monstrosities, slicing my way through them in a completely new kind of *Total War* brawl.

Survival battles are an evolution of the quest battles introduced in the previous *Warhammer* games, where

you face a bespoke challenge on an extra fancy map. As the name suggests, you'll need to deal with relentless waves of enemies as you try to reach your goal – a beefy boss encounter – but thankfully you'll have a lot of help. Fortifications, reinforcements and buffs can all be summoned by spending supplies, earned through slaughter, giving you more things to manage, yes, but also more ways out of a scrape.

"These are very seminal moments in the narrative arc from the campaign game," says game director Ian Roxburgh. "They're all effectively boss battles, where you've gone through a chunk of gameplay and this is the final part towards completing that area in the campaign narrative. So they really fit that bill and give it that climactic moment, as well as just providing an awesome opportunity to look at the Chaos Realms in more detail."

DEVILISH

With this survival battle demo comes our first proper look at Creative Assembly's take on the Realms of Chaos and their denizens, specifically Khorne's neck of the woods. It's a burning red hellscape that looks extremely hostile and, as



GOREHAMMER *Meet a few of Khorne's favourite lads*



BLOODLETTERS

These guys are the footsoldiers of Khorne's armies – but even low down the ladder as they are, they're still very good at murdering people.



CULTISTS

Even the god of blood likes to feel appreciated sometimes. These boys show Khorne how much they like him by murdering people.



FLESH HOUNDS

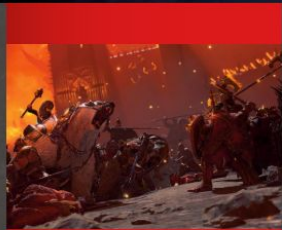
These hounds wear enchanted brass collars that deflect enemy spells, keeping them safe while they do their favourite thing: murdering people.



much as terrain can, incredibly angry. This is in keeping with Khorne himself, a bad-tempered boy with a massive rage problem. It's not the sort of place you'd want to add to your kingdom, but it's probably the sort of place you'd want to wipe off the map, if you can tackle the daemons trying to stop you.

Warhammer aficionados will recognise these evil, snarling bastards. Bloodletters, Bloodthirsters, Skull Cannons – they're all here. Battle design lead John Whitson reckons the army really encapsulates the asymmetry that's come to define this *Total War* series. "Khorne doesn't really have many missile options, has no magic at all, because he absolutely scorns the use of magic, but in return his armies have spell resistance innate to them. And really their playstyle is getting into melee combat as quickly as possible, slaughtering the enemy, using that to field powerful army abilities."

They've got a berserker mentality, and the more they kill, the stronger they get, growing drunk on all the blood and skulls that their god loves



so very much. Senior battle designer Oscar Andersson adds that Khorne's army also contains "probably some of the most elite units available in the game" and by the late game these daemons are going to be pretty deadly. "It's going to be very tough to beat them because there's just so much power in each of the Khorne units." To take them down in battle, you'll want to hammer them before they can get into melee range, or you're going to

THE MORE THEY KILL, THE STRONGER THEY GET

be in a whole heap of trouble.

ARMY BUILDER

In my own confrontation with them, I had a lot more to worry about than just those

berserker daemons. I've grown very used to the structure of a *Total War* battle, but these survival scraps throw a lot of new systems into the mix. It's still a style of battle that should be very familiar to RTS and tower defence players, however. There are discrete objectives, a simple economy

TOP: Things look orderly now, but it's about to get very messy.

ABOVE: Nobody uses axes this big unless they're compensating for something.



to manage, death-dealing towers to erect, and a battle that feels more like a journey filled with big moments rather than a huge pitched brawl. Doing this in a *Total War* game is undeniably novel, but it doesn't feel alien. That makes juggling all the new features a bit easier.

I started off with a small but hardy force of Kislev's finest, with a mix of ranged, infantry and cavalry units led by Katarin, the Ice Queen of Kislev. It's an agile, mobile army that is great at harassing the enemy and picking them off. There are some handy hybrid units, too, which can be effective in melee when they've run out of ammo or need to deal with daemons who get a bit too close.

After taking the first of three capture points, however, I was immediately able to start beefing that force up.

"Kislev generally will suit players who enjoy more of a defensive style of play," says Andersson. "So if you like playing High Elves, I think Kislev will resonate with you quite well. You have very similar elements like you're very heavy on the skirmish gameplay, and you have a lot of hybrids that are both good at holding their ground, weakening the enemy, and attritioning them as they come in towards you."

GRIN AND BEAR IT

The most important detail, however, has got to be all of those bears. Not

TOP: It's actually very pretty before everything gets stained with blood.

ABOVE: Bears versus daemons is the match-up I've been waiting for.





Even when enemy units made it through my gauntlet of death, my troops made quick work of them. Khorne clearly wasn't sending his best. I was making plenty of mistakes, some of which I will blame on the fact that I was streaming the demo, which meant I had freezes and fuzzy picture quality to contend with, but none of that stopped Kislev from kicking serious ass. I wish I could say it was all down to skill, but the squishiness of my enemies had a lot to do with it.

BIG SOFTIES

Survival enemies are much weaker than their regular counterparts. "It enables us to create a battle of a much bigger scale than a traditional *Total War* battle," says Roxburgh. "So you can create those moments where you've got 40 minutes or so of just waves of enemies coming in to really ham it up and create that climactic moment." And you get to look like a badass, killing the lot of them. The challenge, instead, is managing the in-battle economy and dealing with

the relentless tide. That means, even once you've moved on to another capture point, you still have to worry about what's happening behind you. If the enemy takes a point back, you have to go and deal with them, or you won't be able to summon the boss at the end.

In regular battles, the enemy will be a lot tougher, though smaller in number. But obviously Khorne's

army isn't unstoppable. Like the undead, daemons have a special morale-adjacent mechanic that means they effectively disintegrate. "With the undead, they

SURVIVAL ENEMIES ARE WEAKER THAN THEIR REGULAR COUNTERPARTS

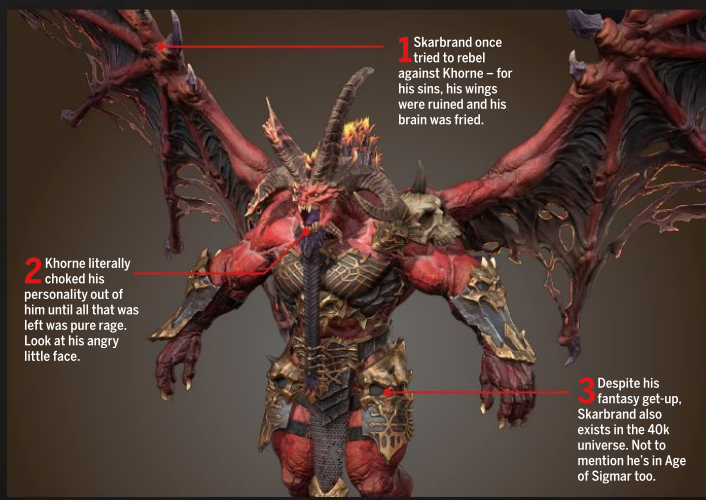
crumble when their morale or leadership falls to a certain level," says Whiston. "With daemons, there's a similar thing with them for different reasons: that they're very loosely bound to their physical forms, and particularly to the mortal plane. And when their leadership falls to a certain level, they begin to disintegrate, which you probably saw in that battle."

only can you field bear cavalry, you can summon huge elemental bears who will merrily squash any daemons in their path. Kislev also has access to a new type of magic, the Lore of Ice, with a range of beneficial and offensive spells. I had a great deal of fun surprising charging enemies with my arcane blizzards.

The daemons were still pouring out of portals, so I didn't have much time to celebrate the capture of the first point or set up my defences. Thankfully, survival battles don't make you wait around. Recruits are summoned instantly near the capture point, and fortifications spring up in a matter of seconds. In moments, I had raised platforms for my archers, indomitable walls, artillery towers, and a bunch of fresh recruits. At this stage only a handful of basic units were available, but otherwise my only limit was my wallet. Fortifications can only be plonked down in specific locations, but there are plenty of them. And they're not just available near the capture points; you can build towers that will pick off a lot of the enemy force long before they arrive.

SKARRED

The anatomy of Skarbrand, Khorne's angriest little soldier



Total War: Warhammer III

✦ Khorne players – and to an extent anyone commanding daemons, since this affects them all – will really need to go in hard at the start of a fight. It's all about momentum. They need to build up those kills, get as powerful as they can, and not stop until all their enemies are dead. Wasting time will only open them up to the threat of disintegration. Ranged armies, like Kislev or the Wood Elves from the previous games, who they'll fight in the Mortal Empires campaign, definitely have an advantage against them in this regard, being able to keep them back and pepper them with arrows and even more deadly projectiles. This certainly helped me during my fight, but it still wasn't a walk in the park.

THE LONG GAME

As survival battles progress, the intensity ramps up, not just because there are more units fighting, but because the units become much more impressive. At the first capture point, you'll just be recruiting your basic

warriors, but by the end you'll have everything at your disposal, and the same goes for your enemy. You get to make use of all the units and tricks that you've learned throughout the campaign, but it still eases you in. This is *Total War* at its most complex and chaotic, but there's an underlying structure that makes it feel very manageable indeed.

AS SURVIVAL BATTLES PROGRESS, THE INTENSITY RAMPS UP

The time investment and level of micro-management means that these survival battles are a bit tiring, but they're not common and you won't come across them randomly. These

are fights that you build up to as you kill your way across the campaign map, right up to the doorstep of the Chaos gods. And if you're playing as one of the daemonic factions, you'll still have these survival battles when you take the fight to Kislev and Cathay. By making them boss battles that you have to earn, hopefully Creative Assembly will be able to preserve their novelty somewhat.



CRUEL REUNION *All the past factions you can bring into Mortal Empires*



THE EMPIRE

Bog standard humans in way over their heads



DWARVES

Never forget a grudge (because they write them down)



VAMPIRE COAST

Sort of a Pirates of the Caribbean tribute act



VAMPIRE COUNTS

You can't even be dead in peace in Warhammer



WARRIORS OF CHAOS

Never take their armour off. Gross



BEASTMEN

Half-man, half-goat, half-drunk



SKAVEN

They build their cities underneath your cities



BRETONNIA

Chivalrous, honourable, and doomed



NORSCA

Chaos vikings that are even hairier than the Beastmen



HIGH ELVES

Immortal and therefore better than you



DARK ELVES

A society without therapists



LIZARDMEN

Warhammer's most evil looking good guys



ORCS & GOBLINS

Just unbelievably rude to everyone



TOMB KINGS

Like to keep things under wraps



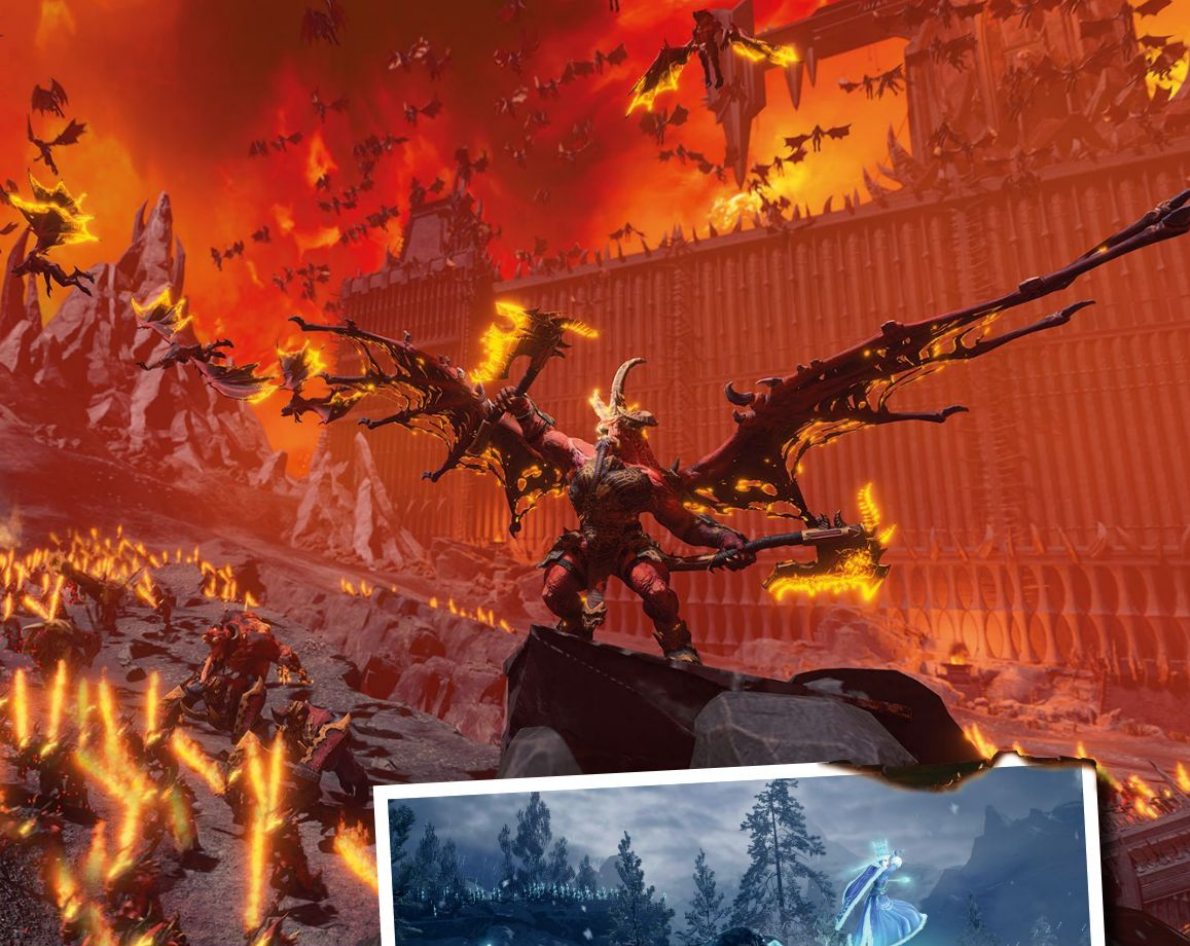
WOOD ELVES

"Get off my lawn" as a life philosophy

"We've taken the feedback from the previous games," says Roxburgh, "and a lot of people really like the kind of idea that we introduce more complexity to the endgame mechanics and give you more than just, just conquer, conquer, conquer, to think about, and to link the narrative to that. So with *Warhammer III*, we've just done that even more." Roxburgh emphasises that this is still a sandbox game where you can conquer to your heart's content, but there's also more of a clear story thread for you to follow "a journey into the Chaos Realms" so you're not merely gobbling up territory. "It's an even more enhanced version of what we started doing in the Vortex campaign," he adds.

MIX IT UP

You'll also see elements from survival battles cropping up in some other fights, including the new Domination multiplayer mode. "Domination battles are a new exciting way for us to get players started with multiplayer," says Andersson. "We



wanted to shake up the formula of a traditional land battle and give players a chance to bring on reinforcements from their army pool and allow them to react to how the game is unfolding. And you're also fighting over capture points."

There's at least one new battle type in singleplayer, as well, adding minor settlement battles to *Warhammer* for the first time in the series. These sit between full blown sieges – which are currently also being tinkered with – and regular battles, and will apparently come with their own mechanics, including the ability to tackle the settlement from any angle rather than just a couple of locations.

There are still plenty of unanswered questions, like how the campaign will work now that conquest isn't the main objective, or how things like diplomacy and the economy will function when you've got all these unfriendly daemonic factions. Even with Khorne's obsession with blood and warfare, he'll still need some infrastructure to support his goals. With *Warhammer III* it's Creative Assembly's last chance to play with Games Workshop's grim fantasy universe, at least for now, and it sounds like it's using this final opportunity to go all out on the experiments. It's still *Total War*, but I expect this will be the most unusual one of the lot. ■

TOP: Survival battles get pretty damn huge, in both length and scale.

ABOVE: Kislev really does love its critters. Bears, big cats, more bears. OK, so it's mostly bears.



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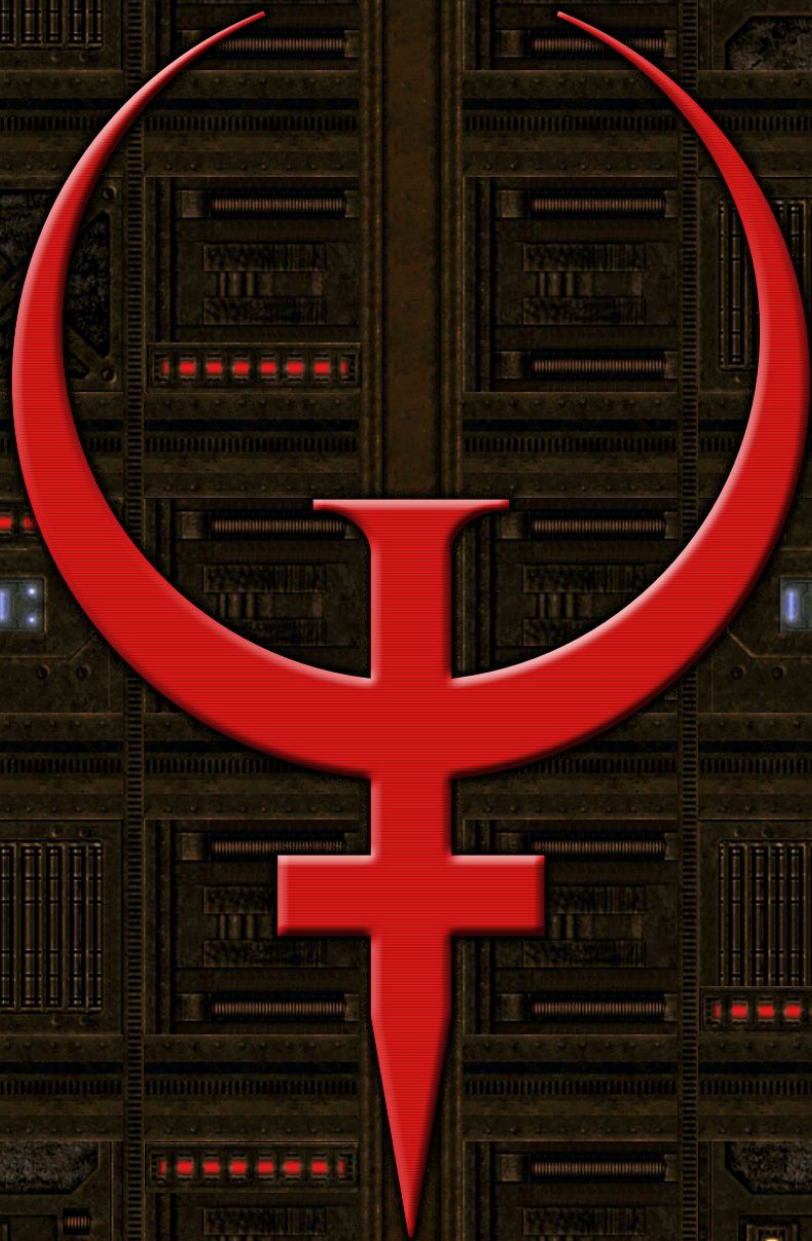
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MAKING HISTORY

The story of 1997's **QUAKE AFT** –
the first ever all-female
professional gaming tournament.

By Alexis Ong

Making History

On her first trip away from home, in a Burbank, California, mall filled with CRT monitors and *Quake* fans, Lorie Kniec Harper's mouse broke. It was 1997, and Harper, a 23-year-old assistant warehouse manager from Ontario, was playing as a finalist in the first-ever All Female *Quake* Tournament under the handle Temperance.

"I got kicked out first, you know that, right?" Harper says. "I was number one in Canada, or I was that year," she reminisces. "But I was eighth in the world."

In another scenario, Harper's busted mouse might not have been a big deal. "I don't know how attached you are to your mouse, but for gaming purposes, it was really bad timing," she says. She'd spent the previous month training for the finals, playing with people all over the world, sometimes in the middle of the night. It was the first time she'd gotten a passport, and she was excited just to have made it to LA with her plus-one – her then-boyfriend, a computer engineer who had built her first gaming rig.

The other finalists came from all over North America: Bridget 'tOnka' Fitzgerald blew off her freshman orientation at Juilliard to play at the finals ("My teacher was like, you are leaving to do what?!" she recalls). Kornelia 'Kornelia' Takacs had made a name for herself at the GDC Ten Tournament earlier that year. Stevie 'Killcreek' Case was a competitive player infamous for beating *Quake* designer John Romero in a highly publicised deathmatch. Rounding out the final eight were Aileen 'Shadyr' Carlstrom, Mars, LaEl, and Queen Beatch.

Case was favoured to win, according to a New York Times article from 1997, but Takacs triumphed. "No two matches are ever the same. [*Quake*] reminds me of chess in a way," says Takacs. "One of my role models is Judit Polgár, one of the best chess players in the world."

While an all-women's tournament doesn't seem like a big deal today, it certainly was then. And AFT – a pioneering event in women's esports – only happened because of a wager.



DM2: Claustrophobopolis probably taught a generation of teens how to pronounce 'claustrophobia'.

WANNA BET?

The tournament was created by Anna 'NabeO', who still prefers anonymity to keep the focus on the competitive players. In the lead-up to the tournament, she did her best to stay in the background because she'd started getting hate mail. Anna was fed up with the perception that there weren't many women who played videogames, much less *Quake*. "It became so annoying that I thought I should get a bunch of girls to form a clan and play together at a competitive level," she says. "I guess that's where the idea of a female tournament started."

After reaching out to id Software for their official blessing, she ran into a snag: nothing was going to happen without cofounder John Carmack's approval, and Carmack didn't think there were enough women for a tournament. So they made a bet. "I think we bet something silly like \$100 or something insignificant – it was the bragging rights that were important," she says.

Armed with \$1,000 of her own money, a home fax machine and id's public backing, Anna got to work and ended up with more than 800 registrants. It was the first tournament of its kind for the wildly popular shooter, which was, like esports today, dominated by men. After securing sponsorships from Total Entertainment Network and Burbank's Slam Site, the game was on.

For Harper, the AFT was definitely not the same as what she was used to playing at home. She played *Quake* online, on a 14.4 or 28.8kpbs dial-up connection. Once in California, she realised that

PRINT IS FOREVER

It's not the first time we've written about AFT

PC Gamer covered the tournament at the time, including this admittedly grainy photo of the eight competitors. Thanks to friend of

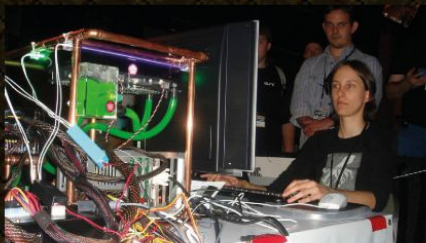
the magazine Frank Cifaldi at the Video Game History Foundation for digging this blast from the past out of the archives for us.



LEFT TO RIGHT: Queen Beatch, Temperance, Kornelia (the winner), Killcreek, LaEl, Mars, Shadyr, and tOnka.



Quake was one of the first games ever considered an esport.





playing on a LAN meant there wasn't any lag to deal with. "[When] I'm playing on a server, I have all this lag, and I'm able to do rocket jumps [and get away in time]," she recalls. Fitzgerald agrees – the lack of lag threw off her timing and made it impossible for her to play her best, even after a childhood of attending LAN parties in New York with her brother.

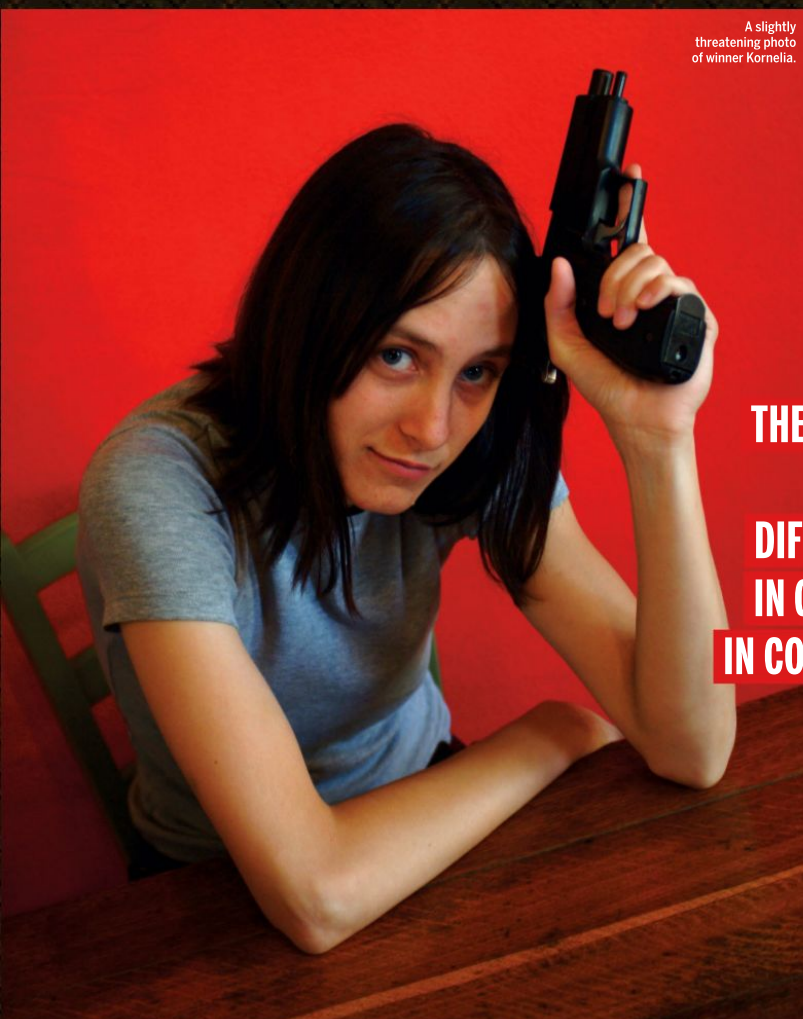
Even then, being eliminated wasn't an absolute loss for Harper because the tournament organised trips for them to such places as Disneyland and Universal Studios as a consolation prize. "Everybody was having a good time. I know this sounds terrible, but [girls] didn't take it quite as seriously," she says. "We thought the whole concept of the game was fun."

EYES ON THE PRIZE

Not everyone felt the same – Kornelia Takacs was, by nature, competitive and serious. "The All-Female Tournament was tough, because I did not have a lot of tournament experience at that point and while at QuakeCon I would be happy to place in the top 16, at a female tournament placing second was not an option for me," she recalls. Takacs was one of the world's first professional esports players and also participated in QuakeCon, The Frag, the GDC Ten Tournament, and the Cyberathlete Professional League in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Fitzgerald, who was serious and competitive about her music, fell somewhere in the middle and mostly saw games as fun.

Takacs, Harper, Fitzgerald, and Anna all have cherished, positive memories of the AFT, but for some, the prizes were a weird point of contention – amid the software, autographed *Quake* swag, and computer parts were also custom wedding garters and cosmetics. Kornelia's was black. "Mine was like a pale, robin's egg blue and it had the *Quake* symbol on it," Harper says. Fitzgerald thinks she totally tuned it out. "Honestly, I didn't even register it when it happened," she says.

Looking back, Anna, who organised the tournament, doesn't see anything weird about the prize choices. "People like to cherry pick what they want to remember, but there were tons of little gifts that I



A slightly threatening photo of winner Kornelia.

THE 1990S WERE BOTH FASCINATING AND DIFFICULT FOR WOMEN IN GAMES, ESPECIALLY IN COMPETITIVE GAMING

put together to try to make it fun and intimate... I don't personally think, then or now, that these things are shocking gifts to be given from one girl to another. When I have a girls get-together, I still do this!"

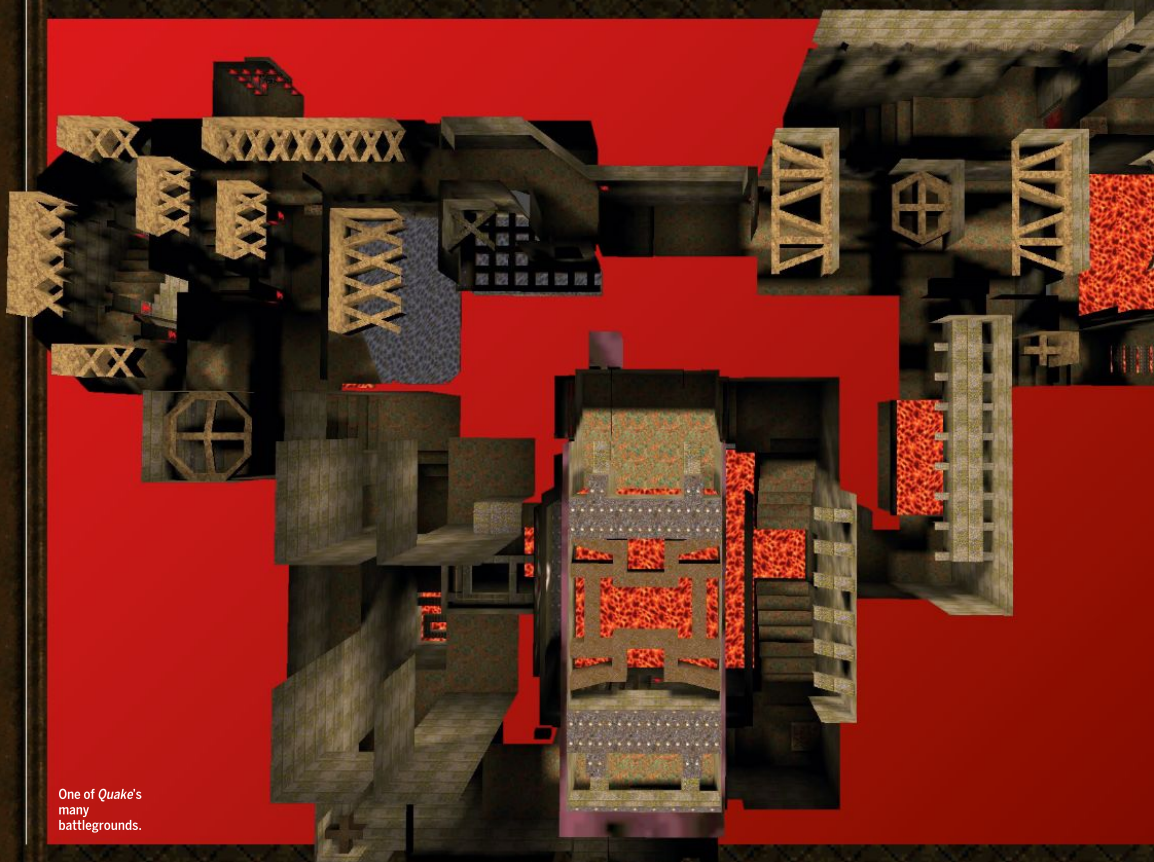
It's hard to imagine professional female players being presented with something like this now, but the 1990s were both fascinating and difficult for women in games, especially in competitive gaming. Anna believes that there are different social standards for women that don't always translate ➤

✱ well into the demands on female esports athletes. "I'm sure there will be a few, but the path is much harder for women," she says.

TOXICITY THEN...

In Fitzgerald's experience, things were more straightforward back then, especially because *Quake* didn't have a chat feature, much less voice chat, and she often had to find players on IRC. "You had to get an IP address, someone had to host it, you couldn't just fire up the old console and hit roulette or whatever... I did not like playing with random people, because you know, men." There also weren't as many people online, which somewhat encouraged self-moderation if you still wanted people to play with you.

"If you became a dick, they were like 'buh-bye' and they would kick you out," says Fitzgerald. She recalls that online shit-talking only became gendered when they found out she was a woman. She tells me about her original online handle, a variation of 'Tank Girl' (which was coincidentally also my first IRC handle) – the comics and the 1995 film were a huge influence on many girls in



One of *Quake*'s many battlegrounds.



Listen, Kornelia was the one with all the photos.

the 1990s. "I changed my name to t0nka, because I was like, I don't need [this harassment]," she says.

"There was a lot of hate," Harper recalls – men simply didn't want to get beaten by a woman, and sometimes didn't even believe she was a woman. "Like right now you can say fine, I'll live stream my game right now with you. We didn't have that technology back then," she says. Case has spoken openly about the harassment she faced.

"People would dig up old pictures of me in high school and new pictures and write these elaborate multi-page teardowns of every aspect of my being," she says in a 2016 interview with the Techies Project. "At one point an ex-boyfriend posted a lengthy, insulting, derogatory post on one of the biggest gaming blogs at that time."

On the other hand, Takacs says she didn't really experience negative treatment for being a woman. "Neither for being a left-handed gamer, a Hungarian-born gamer, or a female gamer," she says. "Back then I was not out of the closet, but I assume that would have been accepted as well by most gamers."

"I CHANGED MY NAME TO TONKA, BECAUSE I WAS LIKE, I DON'T NEED [THIS HARASSMENT]"



...TOXICITY NOW

It's clear that the AFT was a milestone for women and helped to legitimise female pros in an industry overwhelmingly dominated by men. But in talking to the women who were there, sexism in the early days of pro gaming feels like something that either had to be ignored or endured. In Fitzgerald's eyes, the main issue was that the 1990s were "peak misogyny". What she saw and experienced online was simply an extension of what she saw and experienced in real life. "I didn't have TV until I was like 13," she says. "I'm the same age as Chelsea Clinton... and the way they would talk about her on television... I was like 'Mom, what is television!'"

When I tell Kornelia about the kind of harassment that women in games face today she's visibly shocked.

So much has changed since then, and yet so very little. With social media and far more ways to harangue and expose people, harassment has arguably become more dangerous. In 2016, professional *League of Legends* player Remilia publicly quit due to anxiety and mental health issues stemming from sexist and transphobic harassment, and in 2019, died in her sleep. One of the world's best *Overwatch* players, Geguri, considered using software to deepen the sound of her voice, and the subject of women's-only tournaments is hotly debated as either unnecessary or a painfully slow stepping stone to eventual progress – 90% of esports scholarships still go to men.

"People are brands now," Fitzgerald observes of the modern gaming landscape – there are so many different factors for why people choose to get into esports now beyond simply having fun. Women's game tournaments today are a far cry from the days of one woman, Anna, hitting the bricks to bring a totally unprecedented tournament to life. And yet the AFT, for its unique place in history, still remains a bright spot not just in women's gaming history, but gaming history overall. ■

STILL AT IT *What are the finalists playing in 2021?*

KORNELIA

Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3

"I'm not very good anymore, but we just play for fun."

TEMPERANCE

Raft and Valheim with her kids, World of Warcraft with her husband

"You'd think with my history and everything I'd be all-out battling... but I'm more like a farmer."

TONKA

The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild

"I don't wanna kill anything anymore... [though] if someone gave me Halo, I would probably play it for 12 hours straight."



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REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

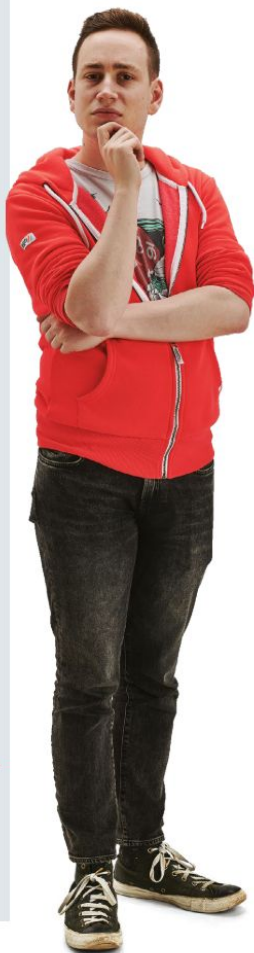
Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals. w



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

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Mutant mess

It's been four years since *Biomutant* was announced, and in that time the developer's stated ambitions only grew. Previews released years before launch promised everything from mutations to mechs to martial arts, a huge open-world packed with a hundred over-lapping systems. And, to the studio's credit, they've delivered on that. It's just that, predictably, not much of it is very good. The ambitions were too high for such a small team. Did that early marketing lock them in to promises they should've gone back on, in favour of trimming the game down to a more achievable adventure? But then would the game have languished in obscurity without that wild feature creep to generate buzz? In a post-*No Man's Sky* world it's a thorny issue, but I do think the key to finding greatness with a small crew is to do a few things well, not a thousand things badly.

Robin

ROBIN VALENTINE

PRINT EDITOR

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This month's genetically-modified reviewers...



JAMES DAVENPORT
Specialist in
Muppet apocalypses
Currently playing
Biomutant
This month
Turned a bog-squisher from the by-gone into a baddie-hitter. Sigh.



LUKE KEMP
Specialist in
Videogame piracy
Currently playing
King of Seas
This month
Learned what pirate times would've been like if Blackbeard had a flamethrower.



RICK LANE
Specialist in
Deadlines & Discourse
Currently playing
Solasta: Crown of the Magister
This month
Spent hours in a dungeon. We'll let him out after deadline.



ANDY KELLY
Specialist in
Hog life
Currently playing
Days Gone
This month
Tried to figure out the difference between a zombie and a 'Freaker'.



JODY MACGREGOR
Specialist in
Lens flare
Currently playing
Mass Effect Legendary Edition
This month
Murdered Geth guilt-free.



TOM SYKES
Specialist in
The deep end
Currently playing
Oceanwork
This month
Indulged in PS1 nostalgia. We've sent him off for reeducation.



MATT ELLIOTT
Specialist in
Artificial ignorance
Currently playing
Observation
This month
Designed an AI to write his articles for him. It also brews a mean cup of tea.

CATACLYSM

BIOMUTANT is a dull RPG that treads water with beauty and charm

By James Davenport

So *Biomutant* is a boring game that survives on some modicum of charm. This is an RPG in which you can leap from your grotesque horse, summon a ball of mucus around yourself to roll up your enemies with, 'detonate' the mucus to send them flying, and finish with a slow-motion *Max Payne*-esque volley of electric bullets from a gun with a trumpet horn for a muzzle. It should be brilliant, gonzo fun. It's tragic, then, that hollow progression and an incessant narrator suck out so much of the joy.

Biomutant feels like it's going to be much more, but in practice it's an endless stream of new ideas that go nowhere and beautiful, toxic landscapes with little to offer except an excuse to use photo mode. It's especially disappointing because *Biomutant*'s optimistic vision of the post-apocalypse is a refreshing take on the end times, with a weasel dressed like Elvis for every fascist cannibal emperor in *Fallout*. But if you strip out the gangly, affable muppets, all that's left is a broken open-world RPG with little else to discover except another cheap riff on the same colour-matching puzzle. At least it looks amazing.

It depicts a vibrant world teeming with life after we're gone

performance as the omnipotent narrator isn't bad, but his saccharine tone clashes with the fragmented English in the writing.

Every conversation opens with a few seconds of cute mutant gibberish, after which Parker reads the text I've already skimmed in the same indulgent full-throated tone and primitive syntax, no matter the context.

Simple sentences take a couple of seconds to decrypt because every other word is replaced with a complicated compound. "That's a Pling-plong-booth from the by-gone, back when you needed to cable words via buzz-wire instead of

LIFE AFTER DEATH

Biomutant imagines the worst case scenario for mankind: total eradication from pollution, late-late-capitalist greed and exploitation, war – it's a who's who of the biggest bums. But it also depicts a vibrant world teeming with life after we're gone. Even though there's another apocalypse on the way, it's embraced with curiosity and inevitability by most of Earth's future fur citizens, from a hulking chef who only aspires to make the tastiest food possible to a mousy fashionista who wants everyone to freely express themselves before the end of the world.

I respect stories that give the void a warm hug, so I'm surprised how much the narration and writing made me wish *Biomutant*'s world ended yesterday. David Shaw Parker's

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An open world RPG filled with odd creatures

EXPECT TO PAY
£55

DEVELOPER
Experiment 101

PUBLISHER
THQ Nordic

REVIEWED ON
Nvidia RTX 3080, Intel i9-9900K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
biomutant.com

air-waving them" instead of 'People used to stand in boxes to talk'. When Parker reads these lines aloud I feel like I'm being mocked. It's horrible.

It's a case of subtraction by addition, a performance that washes over and homogenises the impressive breadth and creativity in the mutant models, and glazes their surface level allegory with lethal levels of pomp and circumstance. *Biomutant*'s beautiful world is much better off speaking for itself.

It's easy to see why *Biomutant* draws so many *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* comparisons. There's my little ferret guy coasting through the air on a paraglider, the roots of the Tree of Life spiralling off in every direction, grassy knolls cut through with rivers and roads, an old highway crumbling above it all – it looks amazing on a good PC. Every vista is a promise of adventure, but nearly every journey is the same.

The classic open world mantra applies here: if you see it, you can go there. But should you go there? Probably not. That eerie tower at the top of the mountain and the deep cavern buried beneath the suburbs are both just full of junk loot and simple puzzles like every other location in *Biomutant*. Sidequests are bland too, most of which involve finding old-world technology to complete an impressive breadth of variations of the same spinning dial, colour-matching puzzle. The lack of imagination is so absurd that you'll even rotate measures of sheet music to solve some puzzles.

So I'm still surprised, after dozens of pointless collection quests and puzzles that are barely puzzles, how often *Biomutant* forces me to stop and reckon with what I'm looking at, be it a weasel in a space suit piloting a hot air balloon over a blackened chasm, or a huge ancient tortoise shuffling around the continent looking for a carrot to match their metabolism. *Biomutant* is a pretty good time if all you want is

MAD HATTER

My favourite hats in *Biomutant*



A metal cage!



Mutant Cat Pope Hat or head rudder?



No.



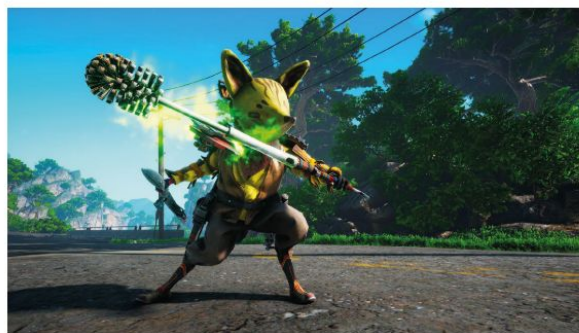
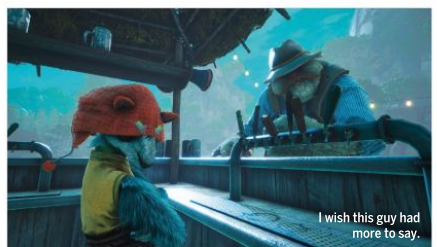
A moustache beanie! 2007 survives the apocalypse.



Noooooooo.

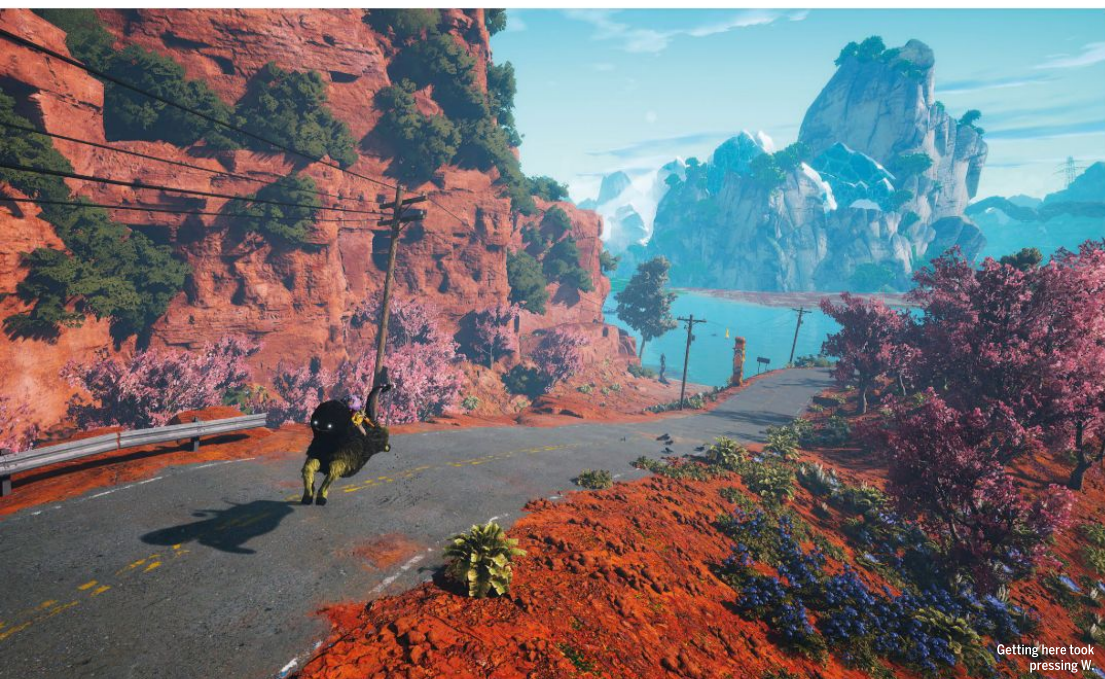


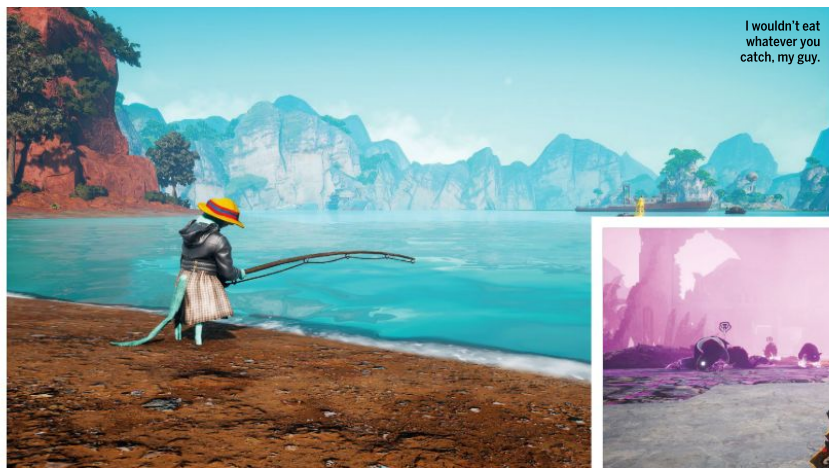
Gotta go fast?



ABOVE: *Biomutant's* own G-Man.

FAR LEFT: Don't inspect the tip too closely. Eww.





I wouldn't eat
whatever you
catch, my guy.



RIGHT: Life could be
worse, I suppose.

LOWER RIGHT: My
supergun melted this
guy in seconds.



Sadly, the only
place you can use
the mech.

something strange, yet utterly beautiful to look at.

RULE OF COOL

The first lap around the map, I was drunk on *Biomutant's* scenery. It's a genuinely stunning setting and you get some fancy rides to unravel it with, including a huge mechanical hand that turns into a literal hand cannon. Is it useful?

Almost never. But is it cool? Yes, which defines the bulk of *Biomutant*, really. Because whether stomping around the ruins of a city in a huge mech or gliding through a swamp on a jet ski with an iron dragon head bolted to the front, the terrain is rarely an obstacle or threat, and the creatures in the farthest corners of the map are rarely a bigger problem than those in the starting area.

Combat scenarios almost always consist of a burly mutant accompanied by some little guys, and a few melee and ranged minions, but they're easily taken care of by any means. Dodge, shoot, punch, or slash – your verbs are limited – I can't recall a single fight that forced me to take a look at my gear, stats and powers to do some theorycrafting.

Enemies are largely the same basic archetypes with different fur coats, and while they're all incredible to behold – from huge tigers in denim vests to oily-eyed tree stump wolves – they're not much fun to fight after a couple hours, in part because of how quickly your stats and powers balloon in *Biomutant*.

Layer in perks, per-level stat boosts, and psi powers, and your cute little mutant will hit demigod status at an alarmingly fast pace.

It's fun to suck up everyone in a giant mucus ball and dive around the arena like a John Woo action hero at first, but combat is so easy I didn't ever have to think about where I was spending my perk points or stat

upgrades. Even if I played messy I'd scavenged dozens of health kits for a quick heal. By hour five I didn't have any psi powers left to acquire. Besides the occasional gear swap, I didn't have to think much about

Biomutant's stat game at all.

A bummer, because there's an impressive breadth of combat styles and weapon types to work through, everything from hammers and boomerangs to dual pistols and bo staffs. Combat feels good too, setting up a steady rhythm between moving in with a melee combo, peppering with ranged weapons to reset positioning, dropping some psi-powers for a quick elemental damage proc, and finally back to melee. But perfectly timed dodges and exquisite weapon combos don't matter much when you've crafted gear that makes your HP kiss the moon and a single punch deadly enough to kill gods.

NUTS AND BOLTS

I love the expressive, experimental potential of *Biomutant's* crafting system. Bolting nails onto beanies to juice my fire resistance, or cobbling together a freeze-inducing shotgun

with a fast reload speed should speak directly to a min-maxer's heart. But it's all lost on flat combat design that never encourages you to spec out gear for unique challenges.

In my first few hours I put together a toxic toilet brush and fiery rolling pin for a dual-wielding melee build, forcing every enemy into comical puking or pants-on-fire animations, health bars collapsing in seconds. Later I assembled a gun that mutilates the most difficult enemies even faster. I love it when RPGs reward gear tinkering and careful customisation by shooting me ahead of the difficulty curve for a bit, but *Biomutant* never humbled me with a powerful new enemy or combat configuration so that I could repeat the experience.

Just a few hours of running off to explore and do sidequests gave me a surplus of high-level loot, rendering most of the vendors, upgrade stations, and the basic crafting systems themselves useless for the bulk of my playthrough. With no need to buy or upgrade items, I didn't need to put any levelling points into my barter skill, and I can only recall two minor conversations that benefited from my high persuasion stat. So everything was funnelled into health, strength, agility and my mutant psi powers. The hardest difficulty option can't account for the glut of gear and simple combat design in *Biomutant*. If you take any sort of prolonged detour, you'll quickly outpace whatever it throws at you.

But here's that charm again, barely keeping me afloat in the form of my Kylo Ren-looking ferret decked out like a JNCO jeans catalogue model. If only my huge pants made a damn difference. And I guess they kind of do, because for all its problems, I still liked parts of *Biomutant*. I enjoyed it with a big pained grin much like the horrific smile of my spherically domed horse. I grit my teeth through the painful narration and groundless progression, if only to see what kind of fucked up muppet it would throw at me next. *Biomutant* is an extravagant cartoon diorama unlike anything on PC, it's just not much fun to play or listen to. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Biomutant's stunning world barely survives the painful narration, broken progression and dearth of stuff to do.

60

I love the expressive, experimental potential of the crafting system

ROACH, EXTERMINATED

The mounts of *Biomutant*, from worst to best



MEKAMJUT
Mekamjut is a metal horse. So basically a horse you can't brush or feed apples. It sucks.



SNICKELS
Snickels is the obligator spirit fox for a game About Nature. Pretty, but contrived.



PUTIGNOAT
Putignoat is a black goat. Workmanlike coolness. Sturdy and dependable and a little Satanic.



MIFFBUTT GNOAT
Looks like someone the 1990s McDonalds mascot Grimace would bully at school.



SURFIPELAGO GNOAT
A blinding white grin embedded in a spherical void. It's really horrific.



An end-of-chapter battle featuring massive Maggotkin Flyfather Festerex.

CURRENT OBJECTIVES

- Annihilate the Sorrowcast Eternals
- Destroy All Enemies
- Flyfather Festerex Must Survive



CURRENT OBJECTIVES

- Annihilate the Sorrowcast Eternals
- Destroy All Enemies
- Flyfather Festerex Must Survive



UPPER RIGHT: Things can get pretty busy on-screen, to the point where it's hard to see your units.



FAIR RIGHT: Assemble your warband using cards you earn in the roguelike campaign.



SET YOUR WARBAND

Only Maggotkin and Warband members here shall carry forward into your next campaign attempt. Skill and Luck cards will persist across all attempts.



END TURN

CURRENT OBJECTIVES

- Destroy the Enemy Warband!
- Destroy Wave 2

Some maps contain precarious wooden bridges that can be shot out from under your enemies.

ROGUETRITE

A universe has its PC debut in **WARHAMMER AGE OF SIGMAR: STORM GROUND**

By Rob Zak

With Warhammer games having the hit ratio of a blunderbuss shooting a target at 50 feet, I should really be immune to the IP's allure by now. But something about its tone and lore just gets me, so when I was asked to review the turn-based tactics game *Age of Sigmar: Storm Ground* – the first Warhammer game on PC set in the newish titular setting – I felt that familiar frisson stirring.

But like so much Warhammer spawn, *Storm Ground*'s lore and fine writing flatter a flawed game that clumsily combines tactical turn-based combat with an odd roguelike metagame.

You start each battle with a single hero unit. As you amass 'Power' over the turns you can call in subsequent units using cards that you earn over a campaign run by completing missions and looting chests in battle.

Storm Ground's three factions cater to different playstyles. You have your straightforward Stormcast Eternals – humans donning heavy armour and divine judgement. The Nighthaunt are a ghostly faction of low-armour, fast-moving swarms, whose hero can throw down healing wisps each turn to heal allies and summon pyres all over the battlefield to act as spawn points.

INFECTIOUS ENTHUSIASM

Then there are the wonderful Maggotkin, whose playstyle is based around plopping down puddles of green corruption which heal allies, damage enemies, and let you spawn units. This makes for an interesting dynamic, as your tiny Nurglings scamper around shitting green goop while the enemy desperately gives chase, only to get reeled in by the gut-tongues of your tanky Putrid Blightings or spewed upon by the airborne Blightlords.

Beyond your regular melee and ranged combat, you can knock back and shove enemies around the battlefield, chaining damage in a similar way to the excellent *Kaiju-*

bashing classic *Into the Breach*.

Knock a Nighthaunt Banshee into its allies, for instance, and if it dies it will explode on death, knocking enemies back even further and causing them to scatter in fear from its death screech.

But beyond these moments, the hex-based tactical combat is lightweight. The maps are flat and scarce, with the only terrain advantages being single-level ledges of

high ground to clamber up to. There's the occasional hazard tile like a fissure or rickety walkway that can be shot out from under you, and

Your tiny Nurglings scamper around shitting green goop

THE ULTIMATE SO-SO WARHAMMER MEGAGAME

Let's smash the best of each together



WARHAMMER 40,000: GLADIUS

Why a 4X game set in either universe didn't happen sooner is beyond us, even if *Gladius* shows that executing such a sweeping idea isn't that easy. Still, a *Civ*-like structure would be perfect, but let's set it in the fantasy Warhammer universe.



WARHAMMER 40,000: MECHANICUS

Warhammer writing at its best is pulpy, but it's always just a couple of pen strokes away from veering into nonsense or adolescent moodiness. *Mechanicus* gets the balance just right in its story of emotionless yet lovable mech-geeks.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A turn-based tactics game set in the fantasy world of Warhammer Age of Sigmar

EXPECT TO PAY

£30

DEVELOPER

Gasket Games

PUBLISHER

Focus Home Interactive

REVIEWED ON

Ryzen 7 5800H, Nvidia GeForce 3070 (mobile), 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER

Yes

LINK

bit.ly/2RZmBLo

some tiles that charge up your Aether (mana) or Power quicker, but it's pretty rudimentary stuff.

Then there's the lumbering roguelike structure, prolonging each campaign even though they're perfectly long enough without the relentless restarts. In *Storm Ground* you can put in untold hours before a single wrong move unravels your entire campaign, and no amount of levelling, cards, or new units you unlock for subsequent runs makes up for the drudgery of having to redo those hours again with little variation.

It gets worse. Once you complete a chapter (that takes about three hours with no deaths), you permanently unlock the second chapter in the campaign menu. So you'd think that you get to continue your hero's journey from this point at your leisure, right?

Nope. When you click to play the next chapter, you restart the entire campaign at a higher difficulty, and only after trudging through that for hours do you get to progress your campaign into the next chapter.

It doesn't help that *Storm Ground* is missing basic conveniences like being able to undo a move at least once in a match, cancelling a delayed action (the button is there but doesn't seem to work), or even clear signalling of which units have and haven't had their turn yet.

The game's combat is easier to enjoy in the multiplayer where it's free of its roguelike burden. There's some fun to be had there, especially if it diversifies the utility of the maps

I like *Storm Ground* for showing me the Maggotkin, but I think I'll research them online rather than wade through a game that misjudges what it is that makes roguelikes fun. ■

PC GAMER

VERDICT

Storm Ground is a straightforward tactics game buried beneath a mountain of roguelike metagame.

59

LONE STRANGER

STRANGELAND lives up to its name, if not its promise

By Luke Kemp

Efforts to build a sense of unease begin immediately in this dark point-and-click adventure. Your nameless character, who is wearing an untied straitjacket, finds himself in a surreal landscape. Standing at the top of a narrow path surrounded by an abyss, the only way forward is down this path to a huge, talking clown head. After telling you a dark joke, it lets you enter through its mouth, and the game proper in this twisted carnival world begins.

Publisher Wadjet Eye has a reputation for great modern point-and-clicks, both developing its own titles and helping others' projects to launch. *Strangeland* feels at home in that stable, but it struggles to live up to the company's better efforts.

Upon entering the carnival, you find a woman tearfully throwing herself down a well. Although your character's memory is gone, he knows that she means something to him, and so the objective of the game is to save her. You'll repeatedly see her jump in, each time unable to stop her, and as you progress she haunts your journey.

Strangeland walks a darker path than you might typically expect from the genre, but it still follows certain rules. You have an inventory, you can combine items before using them, there are puzzles typical of the genre – it's all very familiar. Slightly less common, but present here and very much welcome, are multiple endings. It's not entirely clear how many there are or how to access them, but I found three new ones by reloading the final autosave. One was extremely grim; all felt surprisingly abrupt.

The art is superb. Anything that isn't run down or twisted is strangely organic; the environments are flavoured with a hint of HR Giger. While they're intentionally dark, this means they can be difficult to immediately discern fine detail in, which means that objects you can pick up or interact with can be easy to miss. This is sometimes the greatest challenge that a puzzle

presents, as most of them are otherwise pretty simple.

HOPE AND GORY

In fact, for a game that boldly carves

Walks a darker path than you might typically expect from the genre

out its own path in terms of subject matter and atmosphere, the puzzle design overall is rather disappointing. A carnival shooting gallery is simply a matter of clicking targets with your mouse; and in a world

where I find myself talking to birds, a furnace, and a disembodied head, it's slightly disappointing to end up trying to make a grappling hook.

I've avoided spoilers, but it's very important to mention some of the

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A point-and-click game where what you point at makes you say "eurgh"

EXPECT TO PAY

£12

DEVELOPER

Wormwood Studios

PUBLISHER

Wadjet Eye Games

REVIEWED ON

GeForce GTX 1650, AMD Ryzen 5 3550H, 8 GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER

No

LINK

wadjeteyegames.com/games/strangeland

subjects that *Strangeland* alludes to and explores. Death, grief, and regret are familiar subjects for games by now. Self-harm and suicide are also included, however, in some pretty explicit terms. If either of these subjects are traumatic triggers for you, you may be better off giving *Strangeland* a miss.

Given these subjects, it's uncomfortable that the tone is fumbled on a few occasions. There are moments of dark humour, which are perfectly appropriate. But there are also a few examples of optional dialogue where the aim seems to be a more lighthearted laugh. Had this been a regular occurrence, it could have worked as a comment on the strange and unpredictable ways that human beings react to trauma and tragedy. In isolated pockets, however, it's simply out of place.

While there's an enormous amount to unpack, you don't have to take a scholarly approach in order to enjoy the game. If you're just looking for a surreal horror adventure, *Strangeland* can absolutely deliver that. However, the further you stray from the developer's messages and intention, the more difficult it is to enjoy. The conundrum is this: Considered purely as a point-and-click game, it's not great. Considered purely as an artful exploration of difficult subjects, it's largely a success. The truth of the situation, of course, is that it's a mix of the two, which makes for an uneven experience.

Strangeland is intelligent, dark, and knows exactly what it wants to do. Should other games follow in *Strangeland*'s footsteps however, they'll need to do a better job of providing sharp and compelling gameplay beneath the storytelling. ■

BRAVE NEW WORLD

Making the land a little less strange

1 This is you. Don't be afraid to try dangerous things; death doesn't mean game over.

2 If a dialogue option hasn't disappeared, there's almost certainly more to say.



3 Turn on commentary, and these pop up. Leave them for a second go, as they're spoilerific.

4 Get the ravens talking by throwing rocks at them. Does not work in real life.

PC GAMER

VERDICT

Strangeland's compelling narrative is very strong and dark, but the game beneath it struggles to keep up with it all.

69

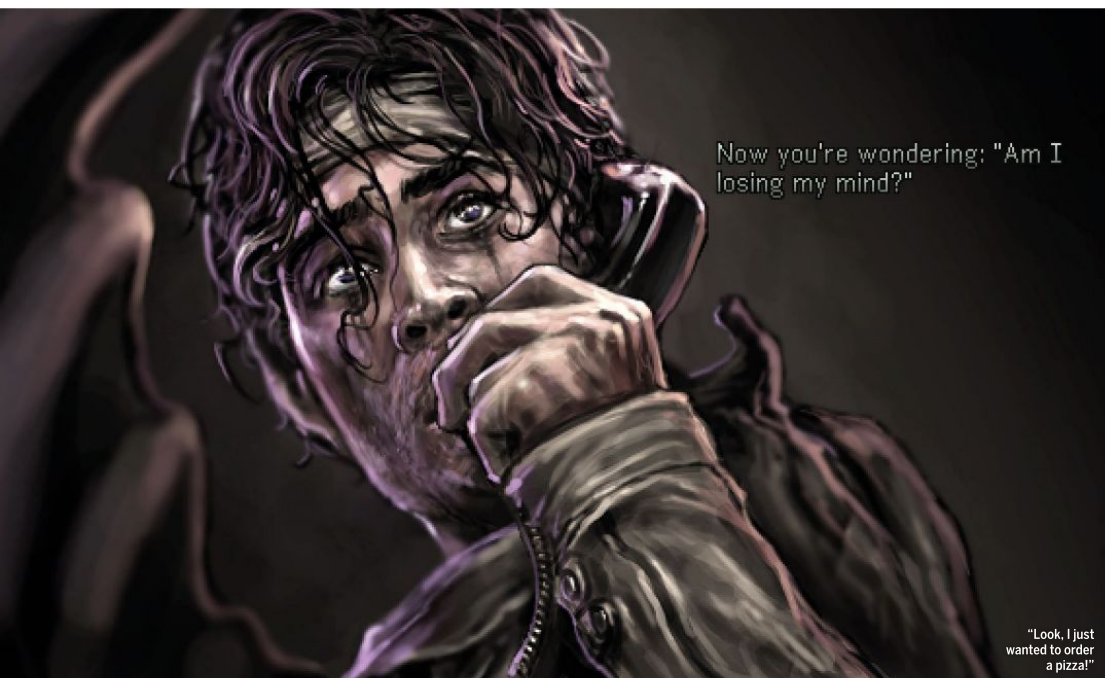


"I've got a splitting headache."



ABOVE: Hair today, gone tomorrow.

FAR LEFT: Mask me anything.



Now you're wondering: "Am I losing my mind?"

"Look, I just wanted to order a pizza!"

ROLLING IN THE DEEP

Get tactical in authentic D&D roll-player **SOLASTA: CROWN OF THE MAGISTER**

By Rick Lane

Whatever else *Solasta* may be, you can't fault its authenticity. Armour classes, spells, wincing at a bad dice-roll, it all brings back fond memories of BioWare's early games. The *Dungeons & Dragons* 5th Edition rules form the backbone of this RPG, filled with giant dungeons and tactical combat. It's a decent first effort from the small French studio, albeit one that suffers from clumsy, derivative storytelling.

That story sees you control four adventurers recruited as Deputies of the Council, an organisation representing various factions across the realm of Solasta. Initially dispatched to investigate a beleaguered border fort on the frontier of the Badlands (think Mordor, but in the west rather the east), you eventually stumble upon an ancient artefact known as the Crown of the Magister. But the Crown is incomplete, missing several magical jewels that can make it powerful enough to open rifts between worlds. No prizes for guessing what your party will be doing for the next 40 hours.

BACK TO SCHOOL

I'll get to the story's issues later, but first I want to focus on what *Solasta* does best – making strict D&D rules accessible. As someone who found *Baldur's Gate* rather intimidating, I credit *Solasta* for its teaching skill. The first few hours of *Crown of the Magister* act as a soft tutorial that slickly introduces you to the Fifth Edition rules, from longstanding mechanics like spell-selection and the nuances of resting, to 5e-specific rules such as advantage and disadvantage rolls. Whether exploring or in combat, I always knew what was happening and why it happened that way.

What helps is *Solasta* structures its ruleset in familiar ways. Combat, for example, borrows from Firaxis' *XCOM*, both in its representation of the battlefield, and in certain

mechanics. By default, characters can move and take one action, or 'dash', spending their action to move further. *Solasta* also features its own equivalent of overwatch, where you can schedule an action to trigger when an enemy moves into range. This is particularly useful for ensuring melee characters don't waste their actions.

Combat is where you'll spend most of your time in *Solasta*, and unsurprisingly it's where the game is most robust. While the stringent D&D ruleset means you shouldn't expect the wild creativity of other recent CRPGs such as *Divinity: Original Sin II*, *Solasta*'s fights are nonetheless both challenging and satisfying. You'll grin when your

Combat is where you'll spend most of your time in *Solasta*

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Authentic D&D RPG with great dungeons but dodgy writing

EXPECT TO PAY
£31

DEVELOPER
Tactical Adventures

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 3600, Nvidia GeForce 2080 Super, 32 GB RAM, caffeine and late nights.

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
solasta-game.com/the-tactical-adventures-studio

fighter's sword crunches into an orc's face, wince when that orc's axe whooshes through the air, missing your wizard by a hair's breadth. Spells are colourful, ranging from explosive elemental incantations like Fireball and Lightning Bolt, to amusing hexes like Hideous Laughter, which cripples your enemy's diaphragm more effectively than an episode of Taskmaster.

On the tactical side, most fights will see you outnumbered, so victory is about maximising actions and using both your party's skills and the environment to your advantage. Much of this is familiar stuff: getting your rogue behind enemies for sneak attacks or crowding enemies together so your wizard can incinerate them with spells. But there are subtler strategies too. Fighters equipped with a shield can attempt to 'block' incoming attacks on companions, making formation an important consideration. Indeed, 'Opportunity' rolls are a major factor of *Solasta*'s combat. Assaulted spellcasters can quickly conjure a shield to deflect attacks, while Paladins can burn spell-slots to 'Smite' enemies, dealing some extra damage.

DEATH FROM ABOVE

Beyond these mechanics are broader, more unusual systems that bring the environment into play. You can crush enemies by pushing a conveniently placed rock off a ledge or knocking a chandelier from a ceiling, for example. Light is a particularly important factor. Fighting in darkness will add a visibility disadvantage to your combat rolls, so it's important to use torches or spells to illuminate caves and dungeons. It all makes for exciting, story-like combat, full of canny tricks and last-minute dodges.

Speaking of dungeons, *Solasta*'s are vast shadowy mazes that are fantastic to explore. Although the campaign opens up more in its second half, *Solasta* is a fairly linear RPG, focussing on a handful of major

MAKE-A-MAGE

Let's go step-by-step through hero creation

1. RACE

Choose from two kinds of elves, dwarves, and halflings, as well as humans and half-elves.

2. CLASS

Solasta features the fighter, ranger, wizard, cleric paladin and rogue classes.

3. BACKGROUND

The 8 backgrounds influence how your character talks and acts. They include aristocrat, lowlife, sellword, and spy.

4. ABILITY SCORES

Set your strength, dexterity, constitution, etc.

5. PROFICIENCIES

Select skills like athleticism, survival, and animal handling.

6. SPELLS

Only for the spell-casting classes, naturally.

7. APPEARANCE

Customise your character's brainbox to your liking.





Kythaela: The Empire wasn't kind to... other races.



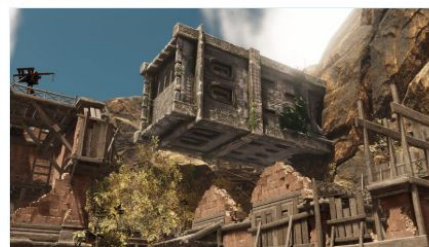
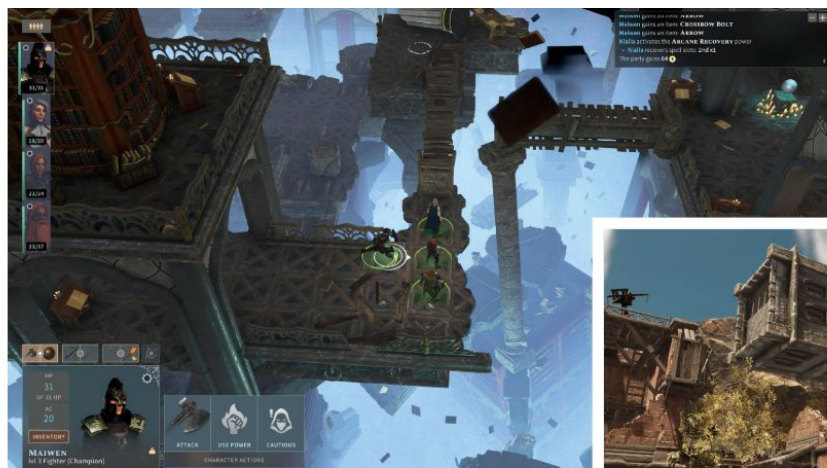
The quest to murder Blue Man Group is one of Solasta's more unusual.



LEFT: The fight for this doorway was pretty epic.



"What goes well with Golden Lobster?"



ABOVE: Many dungeons have a strong puzzling emphasis.

RIGHT: Save-roll this!

FAR RIGHT: Solasta has the most ruddy-faced elves in gaming.



locations that each take hours to explore. Some dungeons are heavily puzzle-oriented, with much of your time spent figuring out how to traverse a series of platforms or navigate a sequence of portals. Others are more open-ended. A prime example of this is Dark Castle, the point where in *Solasta* really lets you off the lead. This vast fortress is home to a powerful Necromancer and guarded by all manner of undead nasties. You can fight your way through the front gate if you like, but you can also try to sneak in through a secret entrance, or even talk your way past the apprentice who guards the castle's outer hallways.

Elsewhere, you'll explore ancient libraries, monasteries filled with spectres, and volcanic landscapes. *Solasta* is a decent looking RPG, although many NPCs seem to have been dragged through the character creator backwards, with false-looking beards and hairstyles that resemble wigs. Dwarves have particular trouble keeping their facial hair on, with all the plaits and rings apparently dragging their beards off their chins.

That said, the character creator itself is impressive. *Solasta* is a true party RPG. While I opted to play with predefined characters to maximise the chance of a balanced experience, the game encourages you to create your own heroic foursome. There are five races and six classes to choose from, but you can also choose your character's backgrounds, each of which comes with several 'personality flags', such as kind, cynical, greedy etc. These flags affect your character's responses during dialogue and crucial choices. A character with the trait of 'Pragmatism' might be more likely to talk their way out of a situation for example, while a character who is naturally 'Violent' will always prefer to have a fight instead.

The differing personalities manifest through a dialogue system that lets any of your four party members respond to NPCs. Most responses are cosmetic, but there are some key decisions that dictate whether a quest ends in a conversation or a bloodbath. It's neat to see your characters responding according to personalities you created for them, although the effect of it is

diminished somewhat by the dialogue itself.

Solasta's writing isn't terrible, but it is often ham-fisted and has an unusual syntax that means conversations don't flow as they should, with character responses to new information or situations always feeling slightly off. The script is further undermined by the voice

acting, which really is terrible. Almost every character you meet sounds wrong, either because the acting itself falls flat, or because the chosen voice sounds weird coming out of that character's mouth. One of the actresses,

who voiced two of my party characters, sounds identical to Mrs Rabbit from Peppa Pig, and after I realised this I couldn't take anything either of them said seriously.

With a better script and more charismatic performances, the background and personality system would be something of a standout feature. Without that, *Solasta* doesn't have much to differentiate it from other fantasy CRPGs. The story it

tells has been done a thousand times over. There are a handful of intriguing ideas, such as an unusual twist on the Sleeping Beauty fairytale, and a primary foe that can disguise itself as anyone, which naturally lends itself to twists and a general atmosphere of suspicion. But again, these ideas are undermined by the writing and voice acting. Meanwhile, the handful of available sidequests are rudimentary and feel distinctly tacked-on. This is especially noticeable with the recently added character sidequests, the more personal stories attached to your party members. There are virtually no hints toward your character histories for the first 20 hours, then all these stories appear at once.

DROP SHADOW

There are a couple of smaller features I appreciate, such as the Scavengers Guild. This band of professional looters go into a dungeon after you've cleared it of monsters, collecting all the weapons and bits of armour you left behind and selling it for you, giving you a cut of the profits. It saves you lugging a dozen shortwords back to Caer Clyften whenever you finish a dungeon, making it a neat quality-of-life feature.

The one major addition I'm yet to discuss is *Solasta's* Dungeon Maker, which as the name suggests, lets you make your own tile-based caves, crypts and castles for your party to explore. It's a slick and accessible tool. The drag and drop function lets you knock out basic room layouts in minutes, but it has enough depth and precision to allow for more intensely detailed dungeons too. That said, it isn't something you would buy *Solasta* specifically for.

What maintained my interest in *Solasta* was a desire to see what lay around the next corner. It may not be the most scintillatingly written RPG, but there's enough variety in the dungeons to keep you intrigued, while the broad array of enemies means combat remains interesting throughout most of the campaign. It also gets D&D right while providing a gentle on-ramp for newcomers, which is no small feat. ■

CHANGING ROOMS

A guide to Solasta's Dungeon Maker

1 ROOMS

Rooms and corridors can be dragged, dropped and rotated into place once your happy with them.

2 OBJECTS

Things like furniture and 'doorway blockers' can stop parties from wandering into whitespace.

3 MONSTERS

No dungeon is complete with monsters! Choose from four classes ranging from small to gargantuan.



4 TRAPS

Available traps include hidden spikes, poison clouds, and the ominous sounding Death Glyph.

5 CAMPFIRE

Lets the party have a nice long rest before the climactic boss fight. Reminds me of *Dark Souls* quite a bit.

6 LOOT

No point in exploring a dungeon if there's no reward. Two chests of goodies for our brave heroes.

PC GAMER

VERDICT

Solasta's storytelling may not be up to much, but its approach to D&D rules makes it worthwhile for CRPG fans.

70

GLACIAL DRIFT

SUBNAUTICA: BELOW ZERO is a survival game with depth.

By Rick Lane

So *Subnautica: Below Zero* is almost as good as *Subnautica*. This may sound like damning with faint praise, but since *Subnautica* is, to my mind, the best survival game ever made, I'd argue the praise is pretty darned clear. Although less consistently brilliant, *Below Zero* shares the wild imagination, adventurous spirit, and richly tactile systems of its modern classic of a predecessor.

Below Zero returns players to the marine planet 4546B, this time donning the flippers of a new protagonist named Robin Ayou. Robin is searching for her sister Sam, who according to Sam's employer Alterra, was accidentally killed while on a research expedition to the planet's arctic region. But Sam's previously recorded messages to Robin tell a different story. Arriving alone with minimal supplies on an unsanctioned search and recovery mission, Robin must follow her sister's trail while surviving the harsh climate of 4546B's arctic.

This environment is *Below Zero*'s primary new feature, and the main area where the sequel improves over *Subnautica*. 4546B's icecap introduces a suite of new biomes for players to explore. Beyond a familiar introductory area of shallow coral and fluttering kelp, the aquatic topography includes giant lily-pad forests, shimmering crystal caves, and bubbling vents that explode if you get too close. In addition, it introduces several new land biomes, all of which carry the game's arctic theme.

The new polar terrain enables Unknown Worlds to bring *Subnautica*'s multiplayer play onto land. When you breach the surface of the alien ocean, your O2 metre swaps out for a temperature gauge that slowly depletes. Spend too long exposed to the elements and you'll succumb to hypothermia, so you must regularly find shelter in caves or literal hotspots such as geothermal springs or the ring-hob glow of Thermal Lilies. *Below Zero* brings other

Subnautica systems onto terra-firma too. There are several new land-based fauna, some of which are large and aggressive, and even a land-specific vehicle that'll help you navigate the expansive terrestrial biomes.

4546B's icecap introduces a suite of new biomes to explore

COLD COMFORTS

It's a big improvement over *Subnautica*'s limited land exploration. That said, *Below Zero* remains better down where it's wetter. As with biomes,

its plant and animal life is almost entirely new, and it's also more nuanced in terms of how you can interact with them. Between the

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Underwater survival sequel with a new arctic theme

EXPECT TO PAY
£25

DEVELOPER
Unknown Worlds Entertainment

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 3600, Nvidia GeForce 2080 Super, 32 GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
unknownworlds.com/subnautica

edible small-fry and the terrifying Leviathan-class beasts are more eclectic creatures like the Titan Hole-fish, which traps life-saving air-bubbles in its doughnut-shaped body. Equally excellent is the Sea Monkey, a cheeky anthropomorphic critter whose behaviour ranges from mild nuisance to actively helping you out in small ways.

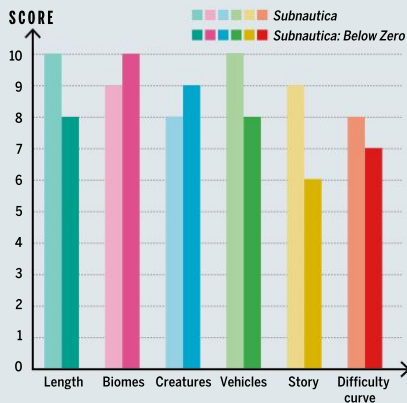
Yet the poster-child of *Below Zero*'s greater interactivity is the Seatruck, the sequel's primary new vehicle. By default, the Seatruck is a small and nippy submersible, but it's capable of towing different modules that serve various purposes, such as fabrication, storage, and an aquarium that sucks up smaller fish as you travel. With all modules attached, it functions more like *Subnautica*'s Cyclops, a mobile base that you can tow around and detach from at any point. It's a brilliant bit of design.

Not all of *Below Zero*'s changes are so welcome, however. The story is far more present than *Subnautica*'s. Characters are much chattier and there are even NPCs who appear on-screen. But the result is a less engaging story. The issue is partly a dispelling of mystery, as you're having plot explained to you rather than discovering it yourself. But the characters are also a bit dull. Robin is your typical snarky American rolled off a Hollywood conveyor belt, while there's another character that, while not strictly an AI, might as well be one for how hackneyed the portrayal is.

Again though, it's vital to stress that even the 'bad' bits of *Below Zero* are good by most other standards. It may not better than *Subnautica*, but it remains a hugely accomplished piece of work, and the second-best survival game after its predecessor. ■

SUBNAUTICA VS BELOW ZERO

Which is better?



PC GAMER

VERDICT

Unknown Worlds does it again! *Below Zero* is a mostly brilliant sequel to one of the best survival games of all time.

86

Finding warm spots while exploring on land is crucial to survival.



FAR LEFT: There are a lot of new building components. Also, posters!

LEFT: *Subnautica: Below Zero's* Sea Monkeys don't come in a packet.



BELOW: Don't swim too close to the purple vents.



DEACON BLUES

DAYS GONE leaves PlayStation exclusivity behind

By Andy Kelly

An outlaw biker drifting through a Pacific Northwestern post-apocalypse is a killer premise, and *Days Gone* occasionally lives up to it. When you're alone on the broken road, riding your scrappy motorcycle between missions, it's easy to get swept up in the desolate romanticism of it all. It's just you, your bike, and an unforgiving land. No job, no bills – just two wheels, a thirsty gas tank, and all the time in the (end of the) world.

You play as Deacon St John, a young Oregon biker who wears a backwards baseball cap at all times. Two years after a mysterious outbreak has turned half the population of America into zombie-like cannibals called Freakers, Deacon embarks on a quest to find his missing wife, Sarah.

Days Gone is an open world game, set across a large swathe of the American Pacific Northwest. It's a rugged landscape, with old-growth forests, cascading waterfalls, dusty stretches of desert, one-horse towns and kitschy motels. It's a completely boilerplate zombie apocalypse, decorated with the End of Days Starter Kit: abandoned government checkpoints, mass graves, gutted houses, car tunnels

stuffed with wrecks, and so on. But it's all well presented and often extremely atmospheric.

Your bike is your life in *Days Gone*, and keeping it running is a full-time job. As you ride from place to place you burn gas, which means

scavenging for fuel when the tank inevitably runs dry. If you crash hard or you're ambushed by opportunistic bandits, you have to gather scrap, another valuable resource, to repair it.

Your bike is your life and keeping it running is a full-time job

RIDE OR DIE

Popping open the hoods of abandoned cars to yank out scrap, or dodging zombies to duck into roadside garages and hunt for gasoline, is a satisfying loop – although it can be frustrating if you

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An open world, post-apocalyptic survival horror game

EXPECT TO PAY
£40

DEVELOPER
Bend Studio

PUBLISHER
Sony

REVIEWED ON
RTX 2080 Super, Intel i7-9700K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bendstudio.com

just want to quickly get to the next mission. After a while, I realised that riding between jobs, enjoying the scenery, and tinkering with my bike is where *Days Gone* is at its best – and everything else is just disappointing.

On a grand scale, when it's speeding past you in a blur, the world is great. But when you stop to take a closer look, there's never anything interesting to find – just empty rooms, Freakers, and a stingy smattering of generic crafting loot.

As for the actual missions, they're an overwhelming mix of stealth and cover-based shooting. Stealth involves crouching in waist-high bushes, waiting for enemies to pass then stabbing them violently in the head. It's incredibly basic stuff, with no unique systems to experiment with, and some very skittish, unconvincing AI – whether you're sneaking past Freakers or humans.

If you get spotted, *Days Gone* turns into a cover shooter that is every bit as pedestrian as the stealth is. The character movement is lethargic, the guns are unexciting, and once again the dim AI means there's no real sense of danger or urgency to the action.



ABOVE: Swarms of Freakers can kill you in seconds.



That gun ain't gonna do much here.



If all else fails, run the suckers over.



ABOVE: See that mountain? You can't climb it. Nice, though.



There are over 150 missions to complete: a mix of story and side missions. But even if you just pursue the story, you're still looking at 35-40 hours of game here, which is too much. The missions aren't varied enough to justify the length.

Days Gone is also deeply joyless, with the kind of self-serious tone a story about apocalyptic bikers with names like 'Boozeman' shouldn't have. Everyone is miserable, dying, or trying to kill you, and the flashbacks to Deacon and Sarah's pre-pandemic relationship are overly sentimental.

But hey, it's a great PC port. With an RTX 2080 Super and an i7-9700K, I was able to play in 1440p at max settings with a completely stable frame rate. It is, however, missing a few things we've come to expect from modern PC games – namely DLSS and ray tracing.

Days Gone is a post-apocalyptic road trip simulator, but the things it does well are overwhelmed by the dreary story, repetitive missions and lifeless world. It's great seeing more PlayStation exclusives coming to PC, but if *Days Gone* hadn't made the transition, I don't think it would have been a great loss for the platform. ■



PC GAMER

VERDICT

Riding and maintaining your bike is great – the boring world, dull missions, and serious tone, not so much.

63



Your knife never breaks, but it's pretty weak.

KEEPING BUSY

Some of Days Gone's most important mission threads



FINDING NERO
The National Emergency Response Organisation, a government agency, is up to something, so find out what it is.



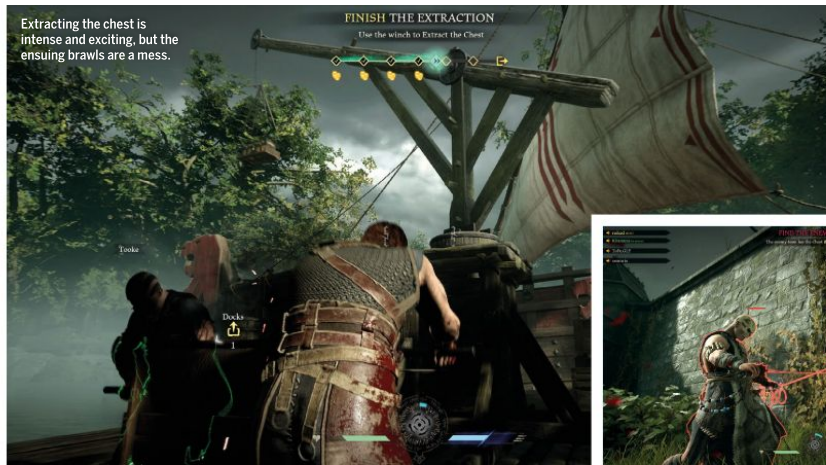
HE'S MY BROTHER
Deacon's buddy Boozeman is badly injured and Deacon has to find supplies to keep him alive.



I REMEMBER
Deacon is haunted by Sarah's death and regularly slips into flashbacks to reckon with his past. Such a tortured hero.

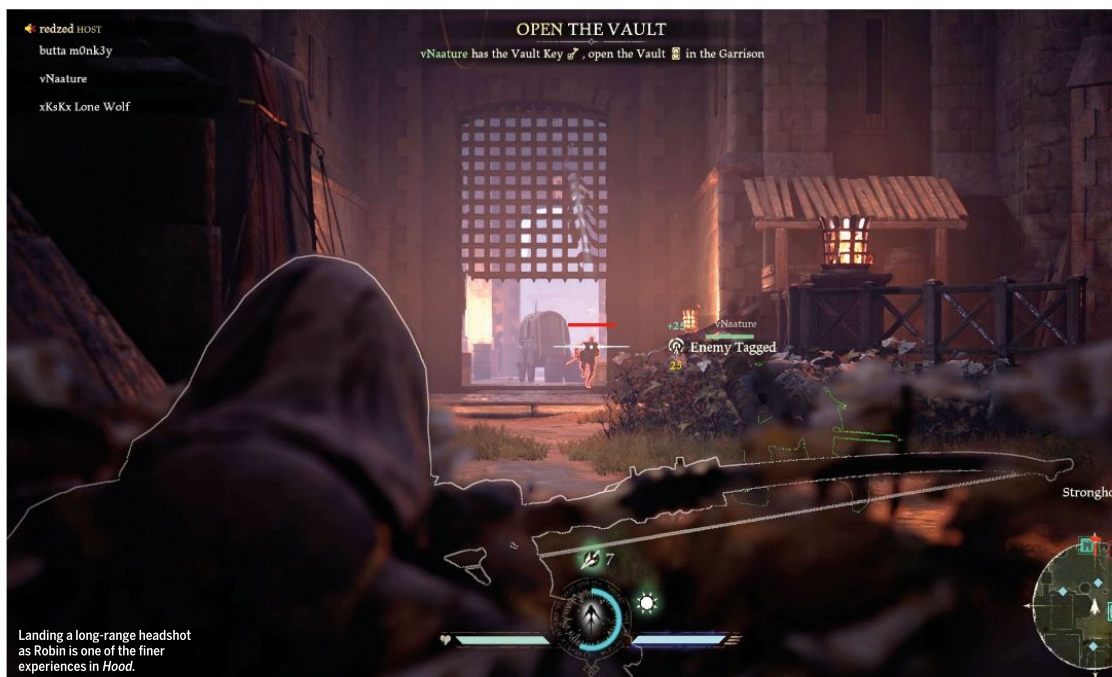


RIPPED APART
A self-mutilating death cult called the Rippers has put a price on Deacon's head, and he ain't happy about it.



FAR RIGHT: A balanced team looks nice, but a team with two Johns will often have the edge.

RIGHT: If Nazis built English medieval castles, I'm pretty sure this would be the result.



UNMERRY MEN

HOOD: OUTLAWS AND LEGENDS is the latest addition to the PvPvE stable

By Rob Zak

Introducing the latest contender looking to grab some of that PvPvE plunder, currently hoarded by games like *Hunt: Showdown* and *Escape from Tarkov*. It does bring some of its own ideas to the growing genre, including a third-person perspective, a focus on stealth and stealing, and an indestructible sheriff who stomps angrily around maps like an ironclad Mr X, grumbling about the vault key that one of the players has nicked off him.

The premise is that two teams of four players are attempting to grab a treasure chest from a heavily fortified keep. The teams start at opposite sides of a sizable map, working their way into the keep by stealthily taking out guards, opening up shortcuts and eventually stealing that vault key off the sheriff.

After that, you must find the vault, grab the chest, and escort the carrier to one of three extraction points on the map, where you hoist the chest out of the level. But beware that even if you've filled up 80% of the extraction bar, the enemy team can pop up any time, wipe you out, and steal the loot before you can respawn. It's brutal, but the constant possibility of your opponents snatching victory from the jaws of defeat is part of the thrill.

UNDER THE HOODS

You play as rather plain-faced imaginings of Robin Hood, Friar Tuck, Little John, and Maid Marion. Robin and 'Marianne' specialise in ranged and stealth, while John and the shamanic-looking 'Tooke' focus on melee. Beyond combat, characters have unique abilities, such as John's power to open portcullises and Tooke's passive buffing of allies.

No ability feels wasted, and you can do your bit for your team without getting into too many scraps. During one game, for instance, I spent much of the match running around capturing control points, giving my team more (and the enemy fewer) places to respawn. Then, during the crucial closing moments of

extraction, I threw down a smoke bomb so the enemy Robins couldn't snipe my teammates as they extracted the chest to victory.

The pacing of *Hood's* three-stage matches is a weird one. Infiltrating the keep is great, utilising stealth systems like alertness gauges and hiding in bushes to make for a fun approach. Once a team procures the vault key from the sheriff, things escalate quickly

as sporadic skirmishes between the teams (and guards) start erupting. But then, just as the match starts to flow, one team begins extraction and

Once a team procures the vault key, things escalate quickly

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

An online PvPvE heist game set in a dark reimagining of the Robin Hood universe

EXPECT TO PAY

£27

DEVELOPER

Sumo Digital

PUBLISHER

Focus Home Interactive

REVIEWED ON

Ryzen 7 5800H, Nvidia GeForce 3070 (mobile), 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER

Yes

LINK

focus-home.com/en-us/games/hood-outlaws-legends

the game descends into a moshpit of melee combat that has all the grace of a pub brawl at kicking-out time.

The combat can be a clunky kind of fun in a one-on-one duel though. At one point, I stubbornly parried blow after blow from an enemy John as – unbeknownst to him – the sheriff slowly but surely marched up behind him, grabbed him, and popped his head like a pumpkin. The systemic wildcard of enemy NPCs and particularly this big bastard is always capable of throwing up a treat.

Hood's six maps are much of a murky muchness, with the only one to distinguish itself being Marshland, where the keep looks out over a vast boggy plain speckled with semi-sunken ruins – the long sightlines offering ample opportunity to spot players and plot ambushes. Lacking presentational flair, *Hood* tries to contrive some edginess by throwing in modern-day swearing and some gore, but it all feels a little adolescent – like when *Prince of Persia* went all sullen and raven-haired in 2004 to capitalise on the emo fad.

For all its flaws, I've had some great moments with *Hood*; a cat-and-mouse chase with another player in the mist-soaked marshes culminating in a satisfying assassination, a perfectly placed arrow between the eyes of a John as he held open a portcullis for his teammates, or pretty much any interaction with the sheriff.

Hood feels designed around these moments rather than the combat that you spend too much time fumbling around with. It's got some strings to its bow, but the handle feels flimsy, and it will at best become an accessible entry point into far more elegant games in its field. ■

TOSS A COIN TO YOUR FEATURE

What tip each part of the game has earned



STEALTH: 4 COINS

Hood picks up some good stealth game tricks that make for some fun moments.



THE SHERIFF: 5 COINS

Sure, it's not very 'Hoody' to give to the rich, but medieval Mr X deserves it.



MELEE COMBAT: 1 COIN

A single coin only on account of how pitiful it looks among the game's better ideas.



EXTRACTION: 2 COINS

It's suspenseful, it's exciting, but it's also too long and scruffy. Two coins so it can clean itself up.

PC GAMER

VERDICT

An accessible online heist game with some fun systems that wrestle with clumsy mechanics and ugly presentation.

68

PAUSE FOR EFFECT

MASS EFFECT LEGENDARY EDITION enhances Shepard's first adventure... a bit

By Jody MacGregor

There are two camps of thought when it comes to the original *Mass Effect*. One admires its RPG sensibility, the bloated inventory and stats that affect how wobbly the rifle is, while also appreciating that it was slightly closer to classic sci-fi than the sequels – more *Starship Troopers* the novel than *Starship Troopers* the movie. Camp two sees *ME1* as a bit clumsy, both the controls and elements that don't fit the kind of story it's telling.

I'm in camp two. *ME1* is best when you're stepping off your ship with a gun and a conveniently invisible tool for translating alien languages. Though you pick your face, class, and background, you're always official space badass Commander Shepard, every planet an episode of your own TV show.

Because I'm in camp two, I'm glad the *Legendary Edition* gives *ME1* controls and combat that are more suited to action-heavy adventure. You can use every gun rather than just those you have the skill for, with reticles that don't bloom out because you haven't put points in assault rifle. *ME1* was a game where I mostly stuck to pistols, now I switch weapons to suit the circumstance, using the shotgun when husks charge

and the sniper rifle at range. It's my third time through *ME1* and only now have I learned its rifles are fun.

The combat's better thanks to that freedom, though the AI's rough. Husks and creepers do a confused circular dance when trying to rush

you, and allies are useless if not micromanaged.

Mostly, it looks great. *Mass Effect* was always good at big space spectacle, and moments that are supposed to feel significant are

enhanced, such as seeing Sovereign blast off. Though parts of the sky look apocalyptic, it's no longer a blur of moody red and black like a goth teenager's bedroom. The whole game is brighter, letting you ogle the improved upon textures.

Planets have been visually overhauled with horizontal lens flare

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
BioWare's space opera RPG remastered

EXPECT TO PAY
£55

DEVELOPER
BioWare

PUBLISHER
Electronic Arts

REVIEWED ON
Windows 10, Intel Core i7, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GTX 1060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/2S5ID7a

FACE IT

The improvements do highlight some old failings. Characters have more detailed faces, but perform the same clumsy animations, and every human who isn't Shepard has terrible hair.

The Mako, a tank that flipped on its back like a turtle eager to be used in some sort of Voight-Kampff test, now feels heavier and has a boost. It's still going to flip. The problem was never just its controls, but the sidequest worlds you drove across with their sheer mountain ranges and objectives at the top.

Those planets have been visually overhauled with horizontal lens flare and particle effects (they're the only place my framerate dropped below 60), but remain dull. The sidequests are the same drive over or around mountains to a bunker full of cover-clutter and enemies, the same circular *Frogger* minigame whether you're hacking computers or recovering a relic.

In the years since its release, *ME1* has gained a reputation as the 'real RPG' of the trilogy because it has this exploration, plus inventory and stat management. That's one way to define an RPG, but they're also about



TOP: Concentric *Frogger*'s still one of the worst hacking minigames.

ABOVE: Should we trust Dr Chakwas?



Kaidan spent several minutes stuck behind this wheel while I fought geth without him.



Enjoy shooting geth while you can, you'll feel guilty two games later.



ABOVE: It's not the Mako's fault you're expected to drive like this.



FAR RIGHT: Though the epilogue's so tacky it's a wonder anyone had high hopes for the ending of *ME3*.

roleplaying, and that's weaker in *ME1*. You'll face personality-defining moral choices between Paragon 'protect the innocent' and Renegade 'take out bad guys at any cost' options. But *ME1* is confused about what Renegade means. Too often they're options to say something xenophobic or punch someone for no good reason, like when you're given the option to slug a mentally ill guy who is distressed because his planet's being invaded. I'm rarely roleplaying when I choose Paragon. I just don't like watching Shepard be a dickhead.

Playing *Mass Effect Legendary Edition* is a constant see-saw of noticing improvement, then wishing it went further. You can sprint outside combat: for three seconds. There's a dedicated melee button: no way to assign sprint and take cover to separate keys. You can skip elevator rides: the only way to hear banter that could be filling stretches where you jog from place to place.

This three-games-in-one package is convenient, but I think these games deserved to be remade more thoroughly. Still, *ME1* is better than it used to be, and it's no longer tempting to skip straight to *ME2*. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Mass Effect Legendary Edition has some modest improvements but deserved to be remade with a bolder vision.

77



GALAXY BRAIN

Why are we just reviewing the first game?



Mass Effect Legendary Edition includes remastered versions of *Mass Effect 1*, *2*, and *3*, plus most of the DLC. It's sold as a package, and you can't buy the remasters individually. Despite that, we decided that reviewing just the first game, which got the biggest overhaul, would be more useful than reviewing all three at once. This review should give you a good idea of whether you want to replay the classic series in remastered form or not.

SHAKE THAT BOOTY

Enjoying the good kind of videogame piracy in **KING OF SEAS**

By Luke Kemp

Let me begin by saying that I had to work *really* hard to resist the urge to fill the page with nothing more than pirate-speak and various remarks about my timbers being shivered. This is a problem I have with most reviews, but especially so with a pirate simulator that makes being horrible on the high seas *really* fun. If all you want is something that lets you wander around being pirate-y, this will serve you very well indeed.

Controls are nice and simple. Speed is dictated by how many of your three sails you have unfurled, which means taking a few down for tight turns, which can come in handy during combat. Speaking of which, to begin with, you'll rely on your cannons. Shooting to the left or right of your ship, positioning and awareness of range is important, as is timing; they take a few seconds to reload each time.

There's a huge number of upgrades to find, loot and buy. Aspects such as hull, crew, and sails will affect attack and defence stats, but after a little while you'll also start to come across special abilities, most of which are magical. It seems unlikely that real pirates were using flamethrowers and magical beams of energy, or summoning giant tentacles to attack their enemies from the sea,

but I bet they would if they could. Most of these abilities allow you to attack ships from a huge distance, adding a new dimension to combat.

After what is essentially an

It seems unlikely that real pirates were using flamethrowers

extended tutorial, the story progresses by, generally speaking, sending you to and fro with simple objectives until it hopes you run up against ships of a much higher level than yours. Not great, but worse is that roughly

three quarters of the way through, it introduces the idea of conquering ports. This is a horrible idea.

SEA SHARP

Attacking the gun emplacements that defend these ports simply isn't very fun. None of your special abilities (at least, none of the ones that I came across in my 15 hours of play) can touch them, which means that

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A game where you would steal a car (if it floated)

EXPECT TO PAY
£20

DEVELOPER
3DClouds

PUBLISHER
Team17

REVIEWED ON
GeForce GTX 1650, AMD Ryzen 5 3550H, 8 GB

RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
kingofseas.net

conquering ports involves little more than doing laps of the emplacements, slowly chipping away at their health, until either you or they explode.

The majority of ports that you discover aren't recorded on your map. I honestly don't know if this is a bug or a feature. This makes finding them in the first place when you need to more down to chance than planning; and it also means that, when a character started to inform me when certain ports were under attack, I always ignored him because I had no idea where they were.

Despite the flaws in nudging the player along, I enjoyed most of my time with the game. Sure, after eight hours or so I started to wish for a better-structured experience that I could dip in and out of, but that doesn't change the fact that this is a great sandbox to mess around in. The need to make your own fun means this isn't a game for everyone, but for my part, I love the fact that I can be as mean or moral a pirate as I like.

As well as ships to randomly attack there are crates and rafts to pick up, wrecks to loot, fish to catch, and a trading system that can often be more profitable than piracy. Each port has one item that they produce a lot of, and one that they produce very little of. So for example, one port might pay little for rubies, but you can make a killing by selling them wood. You can become rich by being a capitalist monster if you so wish.

There are plenty of sidequests to do, but they very quickly fall into one of a small number of categories (primarily delivery, escort, or search and destroy). Slightly disappointing, but – when just getting from one place to another can be an adventure all of its own – pretty forgivable. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Not to just parrot the PR line, but the developers of *King of Seas* are pretty great at making pirate games.

78

A PIRATE'S LIFE FOR ME

Time to take pirating 101



1 Different ship aspects have separate health bars; this is your sails.

2 This is you. Go get 'em!

3 Your player level. You want this to keep going up.

4 It's all water under the bridge.

5 Your special abilities. Be sure to use them!

I like... big... boats
and I can not lie!



Pitch your
tentacle!



FAR LEFT: A capitalist
pirate? Why not.



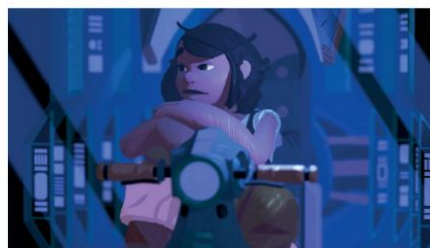
LEFT: Flippin' wreck.



Exchange of favours

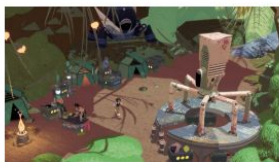
Obtain medicines 61/160

Most ports are more
powerful than you for
many hours.



ABOVE: All the mechs in *Stonefly* have a distinct insect-inspired design.

RIGHT: I must have not gotten the memo about the entire human race being shrunk.



The Acorn Crops, a rag-tag group of travellers.

You can push bugs away with a gentle gust of wind.



A BUG'S LIFE

Pilot tiny mechs and brawl with bugs in **STONEFLY**

By Rachel Watts

Mechs in games are usually huge killing machines that can punch through buildings. Pure metal, fuel, and servos, ready to unleash destruction and chaos on anyone that gets caught in the crossfire. But the mechs on the adventure game *Stonefly* are not like that. Sure, you're still controlling an intimidating machine, but these miniature mechs are light on their robotic feet, hopping and gliding with ease.

Stonefly puts a magnifying glass over a forest's undergrowth, letting you take a peek at an entire bug ecosystem, all from the safety of the world's smallest mech. You play as a young engineer and inventor named Annika who's on a mission to find her father's stolen rig. On her escapades she meets the Acorn Corps, a group of castaways in search of an elusive piece of folklore called the Crystal Phantom, and decides to join their group. Piloting your own bug-like robot, you'll need to help Annika search the dizzying highs and dangerous lows of the forest's miniature hidden world.

The best feature of *Stonefly*, not surprisingly, is the mechs. Not only do they look incredibly cool – a sleek modern aesthetic meets insect-inspired design – but controlling one feels effortless. Landing a mech gently on a leaf and gliding through the undergrowth on a breeze feels lovely. This combined with Flight School Studio's storybook world and warm synth soundtrack make for some excellent exploration.

There's weightlessness to it that feels very opposite to what most mech games strive for. I love the idea of a mech that is not simply a war machine. Something inspired instead by the gentleness of nature feels really novel.

As you're wistfully exploring the world, you'll encounter different bugs and insects, but rather than just blasting them with some heavy artillery, *Stonefly* has a more gentle approach. You don't hurt the bugs,

but deal with them by pushing them off the edge of the area – a much more humane approach to combat. Many of *Stonefly*'s bugs will only need a light gust to keep away, but the bigger ones will need a more hands-on approach, including distracting, flipping, and stunning.

Knowing how to handle each different type of bug makes for some tense strategic battles, but *Stonefly* is very generous with the mech's HP bar, letting you heal your ship mid-battle after a short cool-down. But if you're bombarded too many

I love the idea of a mech that is not simply a war machine

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An action adventure where you explore a tiny world using insect-inspired mechs

EXPECT TO PAY
£15

DEVELOPER
Flight School Studios

PUBLISHER
MWM Interactive

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 3600,
8GB, AMD Radeon RX
5700 XT

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
stoneflygame.com

times before you've had time to recover, your butt will be kicked back to camp, along with all the resources gathered during that outing.

NO-FLY ZONE

As much as I love exploring the colourful biomes, the game is seriously bogged down with farming materials. Resource grinding isn't something I'm usually annoyed at, but there's a lot of it in *Stonefly*.

Upgrading your rig back at camp is one of the main features, but the way you get resources through repetitive mission looping is the game's biggest issue. Materials are scattered around each biome, but only in small amounts, so unless you want to spend your time picking up crumbs of materials, the only way to get big quantities of what you need is to repeatedly complete missions, of which there are only three, and they're completely identical.

These missions require you to track down a colossal bug called the Alpha Aphid, a bug that doubles as a combat area. You need to ride this giant aphid's back, fending off other bugs and gathering materials before the time runs out.

The story will often not let you progress unless you have achieved certain upgrades, meaning grinding until you have the right materials is frustrating. To complete one upgrade, I had to do the same mission three times in a row. It's unfortunate because seeing your mech transform as it gets a new ability is rewarding.

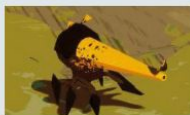
Stonefly left me in two minds. While its fusion of nature and engineering make for an exciting world, the game's loop of frustrating resource grinding and repetition stops this from being great. ■

ENTICING ENTOMOLOGY

Some of the critters you'll be up against



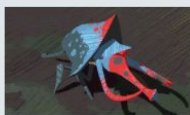
SCISSOR SCARAB
These bugs use their jaws to crack open nuts and acorns on the forest floor.



ROT LONGSNOT
These cheeky critters scuttle about and cause the surrounding area to be filled with burning goo.



BURNING WORM
This bug might be slow but it emits chemicals from its body which like to eat away mechs.



BULL BEETLE
These beetles charge at anything they don't like, driving their horns into unsuspecting creatures.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Piloting insect mechs is a breeze, but the resource grinding stops this adventure from taking full flight.

71

BRAIN DRAIN

Mess with people's heads in **MIND SCANNERS**

By Andy Kelly

The Structure is a dystopian megacity ruled by a government that values order and efficiency above all. And if someone shows any signs of what it considers to be mentally divergent behaviour, it sends in a Mind Scanner (that's you) to probe around in their brain with a series of disturbing, invasive machines and 'cure' them, turning them into its idea of a model citizen.

The problem is, these machines also completely drain the subject of their personality. And what The Structure considers 'mentally divergent' might just be an eccentricity, or a slightly offbeat view of the world. It wants a population of dead-eyed drones who will blindly obey its commands and never question its leadership – and you're going to help it.

But it's not like you have a choice. It's quarantined (read: kidnapped) your daughter, and the only way you'll ever get to see her again is by working your way up the Mind Scanner ranks. The more patients you 'cure', the closer you get to reuniting with your child.

The first step on the road to 'recovery' is a mind scan. You strap a pair of goggles to someone's head and

beam a trippy digital Rorschach test directly into their frontal lobe. You then diagnose them based on the things they observe in the patterns, by choosing from three possible options. Get three right in a row and you'll move on to the next phase of your brutal treatment plan. Get one

wrong and you start back at square one.

After a mind scan, you have to decide whether a patient is, in the language of the game, sane or insane.

The wording here is blunt and gross and totally lacking in

nuance – but that's the idea. This reflects The Structure's inhumane and one-dimensional approach to mental health, which makes it clear they're the bad guys in this story.

Label a patient insane and it's time to dive into their brain, using those

The wording is blunt and gross and lacking nuance – but that's the idea

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A freaky dystopian psychiatry simulator

EXPECT TO PAY
£14

DEVELOPER
The Outer Zone

PUBLISHER
Brave At Night

REVIEWED ON
RTX 2080 Super, Intel i7-9700K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
braveatnight.co.uk

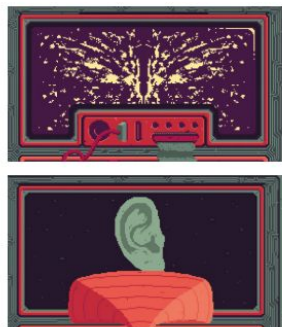
terrible machines to tear out their personality and, in turn, the undesirable mental traits The Structure feels threatened by.

These brain-sucking machines come in the form of bizarre, sinister *WarioWare*-style minigames. Each one treats a different type of 'insanity' and has its own unique method of interaction. One has you tweaking the dials on a tuner to reveal negative phrases in a maze of words. In another you listen out for a Morse code-like series of bleeps and recreate the discordant melody by turning a bank of knobs.

These tactile playthings are imaginatively designed and interesting to look at, but the novelty wears off quickly. After a while, repeating the same relatively small number of interactions begins to feel like a chore. Especially when a subject has a large number of 'insanities' to deal with, which means having to swap between different machines multiple times.

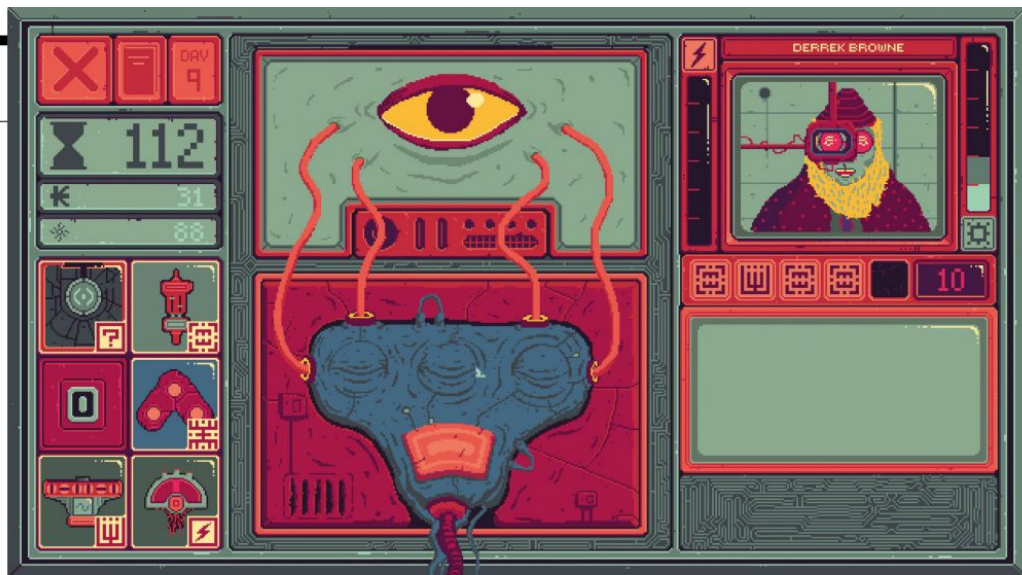
MIND OVER MATTER

You're regularly torn between being loyal to The Structure, in the hope it'll get you closer to seeing your



RIGHT: The Throatizer is one of the weirder devices.





TOP: The mind scanning devices are horribly vivid.

ABOVE: Performing a mind scan early in the game.



daughter, and rebelling against them. You can let people go, even if it considers them insane. You can take much longer to cure people, using a special device to restore their mind.

There's also a nicely designed strategy element. You have 200 seconds a day to treat your patients – and every day, without fail, you have to pay The Structure money to avoid being cast out of the city into the dreaded Outer Zone. This means you're constantly pressed for time and forever worrying about making enough cash to survive another day.

Taking the extra time to humanely treat someone might be the kind thing to do, but it could also bankrupt you and ensure you'll never see your daughter again. Occasionally *Mind Scanners* will, cleverly, present you with a patient who is so deeply unpleasant you actually want to permanently suck the personality out of them with your machines.

Doing this to an abusive husband so he stops assaulting his wife and child feels good, but is erasing his brain *right*? This is just one of many moral quandaries the game throws at you, and the choices you make have a genuine impact on the story. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A compelling cyberpunk story told in an imaginative way, and one that will really test your moral compass.

70

The Structure communicates via sinister faxes.



DEVICE MANAGER

Mind Scanners' most invasive brain machines



RETINA DECODER
A gross blinking eye displays a series of arcane symbols, making a wet, squelchy sound as it does. Match the pattern.



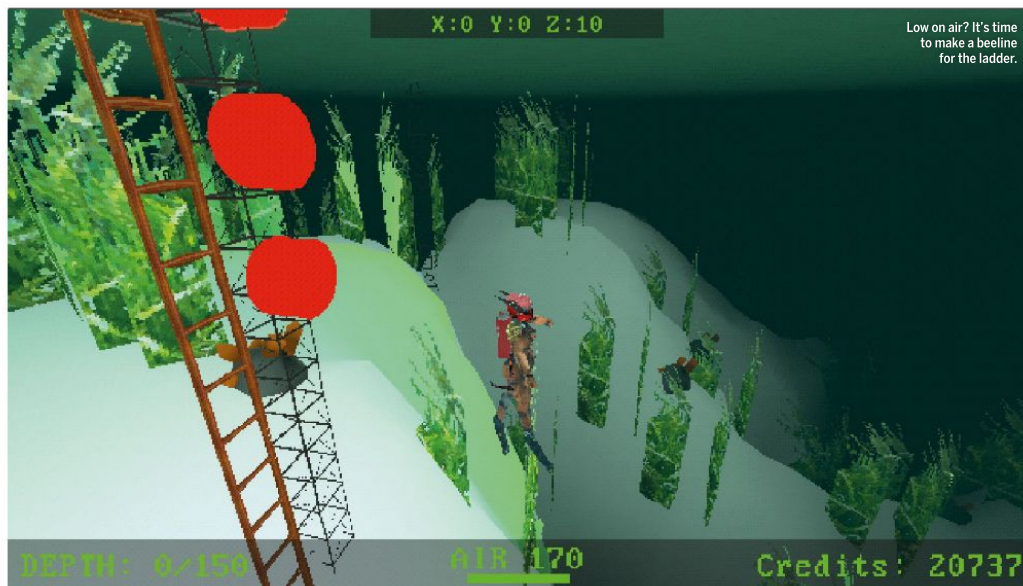
REFLECTOR
Pull two sliders to reveal phrases in a maze of words. If it's a negative phrase, zap it. If it's harmless, click a button to ignore it.



LUNASUCKER
Attaches to the forehead and sucks the flesh into a vacuum tube. Makes the wriggling flesh-lumps move in horrible sync.



SONAR SEQUENCER
Detects negative brainwaves and represents them as a series of short and long tones. Match the 'musical' pattern.



WATERWORLD

Enjoying a snack-size *Subnautica* in mysterious diving game **OCEANWORK**

The world of *Oceanwork* is an incredibly bleak one. As the perpetrator of an unspecified crime, you're rocketed onto a watery planet to rinse it of its natural resources. When you've mined enough metals – and then banked them in exchange for cash – you can buy your freedom for the very reasonable price of 30 million credits.

Oh, it's a joke number at first, as you dive into the ocean again and again, chipping bits of copper in exchange for chump change. But as you exchange that change for upgrades – a bigger air supply here, a sharper pickaxe there – you can delve deeper into the ocean, where the rarer, more valuable minerals lie.

If all that sounds eerily familiar, then you're probably thinking of *Subnautica*, which does the aforementioned stuff but over quite a few hours, and over quite a big ocean full of sea creatures, wrecks, and alien mysteries. *Oceanwork* compresses it down to an hour or two, while looking like it was regurgitated by a PlayStation One. But it's a big enough sea, and beautiful in its own way, particularly when you're stood on the

rusting platform that stands alone in the ocean, staring up at the setting sun. The ocean, too, is suitably dark and foreboding – its carnivorous fish no less scary for being rendered using only a handful of polygons.

I think it helps, even, having so little clutter around the environment: it makes it easier to scan the seabed for minerals. When you have less than a minute to sniff around for the precious ore, then hoof it back to the escape ladder, you don't want to waste

time deciphering the copper, iron or platinum veins from the detailed coral reef. In this sea you've got the ground, some 2D weeds, a load of rocks – oh and that giant, hungry fish barrelling towards you. Eep.

Die and you'll lose half your money, and all your collected

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A game about diving into the ocean and extracting precious metals

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Warkus

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/oceanwork

minerals. But, given the brisk pace of expansion, it's very easy to recover from these setbacks. This is not a difficult game, but the loop of diving and resurfacing is almost as good as it was in *Subnautica*. By the time you're fully upgraded you feel *empowered*. Even if you are still small fry compared to that ravenous fish.

GONE FISHING

The best thing about *Subnautica* is the feeling of mystery to its alien ocean. Remarkably, that's a feeling replicated here. I don't want to rob you of the discovery, but there are other things than minerals lurking in the deep, and *Oceanwork* came alive when I followed this thread.

The PlayStation aesthetic movement has produced a mountain of horror games, but I also loved the era for its oddities. *Oceanwork* feels like one of those mid-'90s curios that you half-remember, fondly. ■

By the time you're fully upgraded you feel empowered

PC GAMER VERDICT

The cliff-notes version of *Subnautica*, if it had existed on the original PlayStation. A great way to spend a few of hours.

82

BELOW: There are moments of beauty.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
August Håkansson

LINK
motvind-studios.itch.io

SWEDE DREAMS

Homeward bound in **HOW WE KNOW WE'RE ALIVE**

In this affecting adventure game, you play as a woman returning to her home town in Sweden, a year after the death of her childhood friend. The place hasn't changed, and it's with bitterness rather than nostalgia that she wanders the streets, chatting to the locals as she tries to understand what happened.

It's impressive, the way that *How We Know We're Alive* shifts over the course of its short runtime. The mystery is dangled in your face before being deconstructed at the close of the game. While it has the atmosphere of a *Twin Peaks*-style mystery – as you explore a quiet, rural town impacted by a shocking event – it's a subtler story than I was expecting, offering no neat resolution to your friend's sudden death. The ending is devastating, and without

relying on violence. A few carefully chosen words can twist the knife just as well as an actual weapon.

But the writing is only one aspect of *How We Know*'s atmosphere. The soundtrack tugs at the heart, while the striking pixel art brings this small Swedish town to life. In the early part of the game, a downpour hammers Härunga's streets, with a watery film casting reflections on the road below. You might be walking back and forth, linearly between chats, but the weather is vibrant enough that this never feels dull or repetitive.

There's a duality to small town life that *How We Know* captures nicely. These might seem beautiful towns that many would want to live in, but they can feel suffocating when you're growing up. *How We Know* explores this duality in an understated and thoughtful manner. ■

82

BELOW: The game switches genres frequently.

GARDENER'S WORLD

Lost in shrubbery in **PURCITOP GARDEN**

I love the individuality of *Purcitop Garden*, even if I question its underlying foundations. It's a game about solving mazes, which takes place in the biggest garden this side of Babylon – so vast it's split up into several procedurally generated levels. You're there to meet your uncle – the inventor Professor Eustace – but first you have to fathom your way around his sprawling garden.

From a top-down perspective, you'll trudge through a series of mazes hitting dead ends and doubling back on yourself, before finally acquiring the key to each exit and moving on. This simple act of orienteering is soon expanded with NPCs, acquirable tools including hedge trimmers, and occasional minigames in a variety of genres. There's bags of

content here, and it's all whimsical, giving off the vibe of a cosy old children's novel set in the English countryside. You'll talk to foxes, race snails, and insult gnomes. It's a lovely game, if rather a tedious one.

Real-life mazes can be wonderful things, but they've a questionable history in videogames, and *Purcitop's Garden* doesn't deliver them redemption. With its sluggish movement speed and repetitive environments, it's just not much fun tramping around each sizeable map. It feels laborious, even with the aid of a mini-map. *Purcitop* throws everything up the garden path to make its mazes more interesting, but nothing makes up for these acts of gruelling exploration. But if you can put up with a bit of gruel, there's an excess of charm inside this weird and whimsical garden. ■



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
fallahn

LINK
fallahn.itch.io

60

THEY'RE BACK

OLD GAMES REVISITED by Matthew Elliott



SPHERE & LOATHING

Not paying enough attention in **OBSERVATION**

We've all experienced that feeling in a new relationship where, for a while, everything is perfect. They're handsome. Smart. Surprising. They like all the same things you do and help you see the world differently. Then, just when you begin to think they might be 'the one', you wake up one night to find them listening to Mumford and Sons while gnawing human hands, and the magic evaporates.

This is similar to what happened to me in *Observation*. The game's unique, granular take on speculative fiction feels refined and thoughtful – the sci-fi equivalent of charity shopping your IKEA furniture and replacing it with stuff from Swoon. But things unravel about an hour in. I'm solving a puzzle that involves coolant. I faff about scanning torn instructions and spend some time inputting codes. It's already irritating, because there are four possible codes for only three stations, which, in my suspicious, solution-focused lizard brain, immediately tells me I've missed something. Which I have – just not in a way I can fix. My AI character, Sam, has the ability to highlight problems and relay the information

to my human companion Emma. But despite pressing the urgency of the situation, I'm supposed to tell Emma what I'm doing before I do it, like an anxious fireman. "Are you sure you want me to cut you from the

It's an environment where up and down lose all meaning

wreckage? It'll be rather noisy." I haven't, so I can't complete the coolant puzzle, and I have to exit the game to try again. It's not quite eating human hands but it's an example of the regular vagueness that dents my enjoyment of an otherwise brilliant game.

LOST IN SPACE

Perhaps it's intentional. We are aboard a space station, after all, and it's an environment where up and down lose all meaning. But I struggle

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
2001: A Space Odyssey from HAL's POV

EXPECT TO PAY
£19.50

DEVELOPER
No Code

PUBLISHER
Devolver Digital

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700 CPU
@ 3.60GHz, 16 GB RAM,
NVIDIA GeForce GTX
1070, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/3oDQny8

to make sense of the game's labyrinth of identical, interlocking tubes, even with the use of waypoints. I'm sure it's quite realistic, but as a piece of game design it makes me feel like a grandma inside a tumble dryer trying to read Google maps. I hate myself for saying it, but some functional idiot-proofing would increase my ability to engage with *Observation*. Things like telling me which airlock I need to go back to after getting lost in the cold void of space, for example.

After all this grumbling the number below suggests I got so lost I included the wrong score. But *Observation* has to be played, thanks to the story and the level of narrative restraint. It doesn't batter you with jumpscare, leaving you to stew on exactly how perilous Emma's situation is. On the one hand I love how much the game trusts me. On the other, my journey suggests that that trust was unfounded. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Observation is a uniquely refined sci-fi experience designed for people with an infinite amount of patience.

71

BELOW: Standard yellow and black hazard lines as per 1990s sci-fi.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£7

DEVELOPER
Irrational Games

PUBLISHER
Nightdive Studios

SHODANS OVER

Unexpected primate violence in **SYSTEM SHOCK 2**

It seems like faint praise to celebrate *System Shock 2* – an epoch-defining game of enduring influence – because the signage is good. But by God, this is a game that knows how to direct me.

I'm assailed by fat, welcoming arrows that disintegrate any doubt about where I am or where I'm going, and it's one of many elements that mean *System Shock 2* remains wickedly immediate 22 years after release. There's a crisp, functional simplicity to everything that's like going back to a Windows 98 PC with only four things on the desktop. Even navigating the simple drag-and-drop menus is weirdly charming. Other touches give it the feel of an Ultima-style RPG with sci-trappings – things like being able to write on the map in case the tiny icons aren't enough to direct me.

Despite the obvious influence on games like *Bioshock* and *Prey*, I'm surprised by how reactive and adaptable it is. Other elements are less immediately satisfying. Ranged combat is snappy and tactile, but melee attacks are literally hit-and-miss. It's less of an issue as you accumulate more ammo, but for one of the most critically acclaimed games of all time I spend more time than expected failing to hit psionically-charged monkeys with a wrench. The choice of skills, too, is impressive, even if I feel like I've rolled the Fisher Price version of a *System Shock* protagonist – a tool-swinging dunce who couldn't hack his way into a calculator. The breadth of choice is well represented in the game's spiritual successors, but I am glad we ditched the telepathic battle chimps. ■

88



THOMAS WAS ALONE

Every workplace has a Chris. He's short, furious, and less capable than his 'flashy' associates. It's only a matter of time before Chris a) finds love and becomes whole or b) joins the Flat Earth Movement and starts screaming at people outside Primark. And it's a testament to the construction of *Thomas Was Alone* that I can create a backstory for Chris, a *literal cube*. It would be tragic – like a lonely butcher's son drawing eyes on a ham – if it wasn't so telling. I also feel Danny Wallace's chipper, internal monologues should be an option in every game – let him narrate *Agony* and I'll die happy.

It's all slightly smug and arch, but it deserves to be, because it's brilliant. ■

81



INVISIBLE INC

As ever, it's the game with the least-obvious link that requires me to straight-up say what this month's theme is (it's AI, folks). It says a lot about *Invisible Inc* that even the AI, Incognita, looks like a Louis Vuitton model, albeit one made out of conductive tracks. It's one of those turn-based stealth games that makes you feel cooler than disco tzatziki right up until the point your plans turn to sewage and your agents get brutalised. There's a brilliant sense of time slipping away with every mission, and the setting and prevalence of cheekbones will make you feel handsome and capable by proxy, even if every stumbling failure is nothing but your own fault. You sexy idiot. ■

74

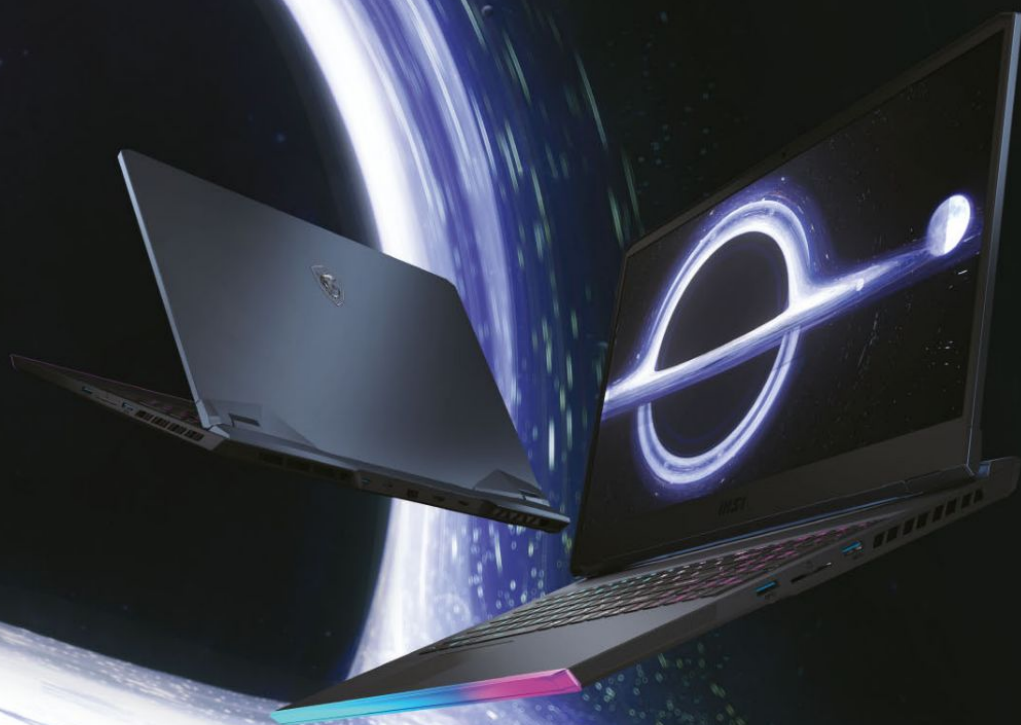


She's actually slowly walking backwards out of the facility.

THE TURING TEST

Ive devised my own test for AIs in games. Are you an AI in a game? If you answered 'yes': get away from me before I unplug you. Because although TOM from *The Turing Test* feels warm and benevolent, there's enough underlying threat in the game to make anyone suspicious. The neat puzzles and soft robot guidance hide a deft, twisting story, perfect for anyone who wants *Portal* with fewer lemonade jokes and more introspective examination of the nature of machine intelligence. ■

80



LIGHT 'EM UP

GE66 RAIDER



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HARDWARE

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE



96

GROUP TEST

The best PSUs on the market today.



100

TECH REPORT

The truth behind all the hardware shortages.



102

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build your perfect PC with our expert guide.

GROUP TEST

POWER SUPPLY UNITS

What's the best PSU for PC gaming?

By Aristeidis Bitziopoulos

2



A power supply is maybe not going to be the first product you pick for your new gaming PC build project, but it could be one of the most important. It's the heart of your PC – it feeds every component you have in your machine, and

if your PSU goes down, it can take everything else with it

From the CPU up to your precious graphics card, everything in your PC benefits from a decent PSU. The good units last for several system builds, even. So, if you make a good investment, you won't have

to spend extra money the next time you perform an upgrade. The way new processors and graphics cards are chewing through more power with each generation, that's a legitimate concern. This means that you should plan to buy a reliable PSU with enough connectors to cover any possible upgrades.



RM750x (2021)

CORSAIR **£115**

The best power supply for an RTX 3080

1 The time has come for Corsair to make some changes to its popular RMx line of power supplies since the competition has gotten far tougher in this segment of the market. Indeed the task's not easy since the existing RMx units only counted three years in production and delivered excellent performance. In most cases, when you try to improve something already good, many things can go wrong, but thankfully this wasn't the case for the new Corsair RMx range.

The new RM750x has a significant performance lead over its predecessor, although it loses

average noise output to the older model's dead silent operation. The only section that needs a slight improvement is the efficiency under high loads, which is the main reason for the average efficiency. Nonetheless, the efficiency under light loads is sky-high. With two EPS and four PCIe connectors in two cables, this PSU will be able to handle a powerful gaming system with enough oomph to cope with a GeForce RTX 3080.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Magnetic Levitation fan
- Fully modular
- Ten-year warranty

SPECS MANUFACTURER (OEM): CWT / **MAX DC OUTPUT:** 750W / **EFFICIENCY:** 80 PLUS GOLD / **NOISE:** CYBENETICS A- (25-30 DBA) / **COOLING:** 140MM MAG LEV FAN (NR140ML) / **MODULARITY:** FULLY MODULAR

Prime Titanium TX-1000

SEASONIC **£300**

The best 1KW power supply

2 The Seasonic TX-1000 is a great power supply featuring top-notch build quality. Besides great soldering work, it also uses Japanese capacitors everywhere, including many polymer caps besides electrolytic ones and a fluid dynamic bearing fan.

Seasonic's engineers did their best to offer sky-high efficiency under all load regions and silent operation, at the same time, along with increased reliability. Performance-wise, this PSU belongs to the top league since it achieves tight load regulation on all rails, it has terrific ripple suppression without using the

annoying in-line caps, and its hold-up time is sky-high. On top of that, the 5VSB rail's efficiency is high, and at light loads, the PSU achieves some of the highest efficiency readings we have seen so far. Another asset of the TX-1000 is that it has six PCIe connectors on dedicated cables. You won't have a problem powering energy-hungry graphics cards where the use of a single cable with two PCIe connectors should be avoided.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- High performance
- Fully modular
- 12-year warranty

SPECS MANUFACTURER (OEM): SEASONIC / **MAX DC OUTPUT:** 1000W / **EFFICIENCY:** 80 PLUS TITANIUM / **NOISE:** CYBENETICS A- (25-30 DBA) / **COOLING:** 135MM FDB FAN (HA13525M2F-Z) / **MODULARITY:** FULLY MODULAR



IT IS VERY RARE TO FIND SUCH A MODERN PLATFORM IN THIS PRICE RANGE

3

CX450

CORSAIR £30

The best cheap PSU

3 The lowest capacity member of Corsair's budget-oriented CX line is the CX450. All CX models are manufactured by two different OEMs: either Great Wall and Channel Well Technology (CWT), and each of which uses a distinct platform. The only way to tell them apart is their RPS numbers, designators given to each model. Despite their low cost, they utilise modern platforms featuring LLC resonant converters and voltage regulation modules to generate the minor rails, and high-quality fans. In fact it is very rare to find such a modern platform in this price range.

Between the two Corsair CX450 versions, the model made by Great Wall is more efficient than CWT's and has a more efficient 5VSB rail. On the other hand, it has a more aggressive fan profile. In general, though, the Corsair CX450 in both flavours offers a high performance per price ratio, and it is an excellent choice for mainstream builds with low-power graphics cards. In this price range, you won't find such a modern and capable platform.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Modern platform
- Full protections set
- Five-year warranty

SPECS MANUFACTURER (OEM): CWT OR GREAT WALL / **MAX DC OUTPUT:** 450W / **EFFICIENCY:** 80 PLUS BRONZE / **NOISE:** CYBENETICS A- (25-30 DBA - CWT) / **COOLING:** 120MM RIFLE BEARING FAN / **MODULARITY:** NO

Core Reactor 650W

XPG £80

The best mid-range PC power supply

4 XPG rocked the boat with its Core Reactor line, an impressive set of PSUs using a competent platform provided by Channel Well Technology. The XPG Core Reactor with 650W capacity has to face strong opponents, such as the Corsair RM650x, the Seasonic GX-650, and the Asus Rog Strix 650. Still, it manages to lead the race, and this is impressive. Especially as XPG hasn't been such a power in this market historically. But it has apparently hired the proper people for the job.

The Core Reactor 650 doesn't only achieve high performance,

but it is dead silent too, with close to 23 dBA average noise output. Moreover, its average efficiency with 115V is close to 89.5%, leading to the Gold 650W efficiency category. The only real drawback in this unit is the pair of EPS connectors hosted on the same cable. Usually, EPS connectors should be installed on dedicated cables for lower voltage drops and enhanced safety, but the platform didn't provide enough sockets for this.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- High performance
- Good build quality
- Ten-year warranty

SPECS MANUFACTURER (OEM): CWT / **MAX DC OUTPUT:** 650W / **EFFICIENCY:** 80 PLUS GOLD / **NOISE:** CYBENETICS A (20-25 DBA) / **COOLING:** 120MM FLUID DYNAMIC BEARING FAN (HA1225H2F-Z) / **MODULARITY:** FULLY MODULAR

4



5



WHICH PSU WATTAGE AND RATING SHOULD I GO FOR?

You don't need a degree in rocket science to work out the wattage requirements for your system. The recommended system power requirement listed with your current or future graphics card is a great place to start. We also recommend using an online power calculator, such as OuterVision's Power Supply Calculator.

Once you've found out the wattage you'll need for your PC, you'll need to decide what efficiency you can afford. Power supply manufacturers all tend to agree to the same PSU efficiency rating system: 80 Plus.

An 80 Plus Titanium certified power supply is more efficient than a Bronze one, meaning the parts within waste less power (as heat) during the AC to DC conversion. These are often measured across three load levels: 20%, 50%, and 100%. Most PSUs tend to be rated at their most efficient at 50%, although most modern PSUs of Gold rating or better will operate just as well with light loads.



6

AX1600i

CORSAIR **£500**

The best power supply for monster PC builds

5 The Corsair AX1600i was the first desktop PSU to use its cutting-edge technology, but even several years after its initial release still few other PSUs utilise it. In short, the AX1600i uses a totem-pole PFC converter, utilising GAN MODFETs, which can offer up to 99% efficiency compared to the 96% efficiency levels that the most advanced conventional APFC converters can deliver.

OK, those are the technical details, but what you really need to know is that this is about as efficient as power supplies get.

The AX1600i is the worthy successor of the legendary

AX1500i. Both units are made by Flextronics, using cutting-edge technology, while offering the best performance that money can buy today. Besides being highly efficient, the AX1600i also offers outstanding load regulation, excellent transient response, long hold-up time and excellent ripple suppression.

You will pay a lot to get your hands on a Corsair AX1600i, but there is nothing else able to meet this PSU eye-to-eye.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Powerful with top performance
- Silent operation
- Software control

SPECS MANUFACTURER (OEM): FLEXTRONICS / **MAX DC OUTPUT:** 1600W / **EFFICIENCY:** 80 PLUS TITANIUM / **NOISE:** CYBENETICS A (20-25 DBA) / **COOLING:** 140MM FLUID DYNAMIC BEARING FAN (NR140P) / **MODULARITY:** FULLY MODULAR

Ion SFX 650 Gold

FRAC TAL DESIGN **£100**

The best small form factor power supply

6 More of the best power supply brands have expanded into the small form factor category recently, an area that has started to garner much greater interest from gamers too. A few years ago, SFF PSUs were niche products, but the introduction of elegant small chassis has increased the competition.

However, using the term 'SFX' isn't so accurate since both Fractal's Ion units follow the unofficial SFX-L form factor. Because of the larger than SFX depth, SFX-L units allow for larger cooling fans and better airflow. That means they can have more

relaxed fan speed profiles. On top of that, the larger PCBs allow for higher capacity units too, up to 1000W. The Ion SFX 650 G's overall performance matches that of the Corsair SF600 Gold, one of the top SFX offerings. The advantages of the Ion SFX 650G over its Corsair adversary are the larger 120mm fan, along with the highly flexible modular cables, which indeed make a difference during the cable routing and installation processes.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- High overall performance
- Ten-year warranty
- Aggressive fan speed profile

SPECS MANUFACTURER (OEM): SEASONIC / **MAX DC OUTPUT:** 650W / **EFFICIENCY:** 80 PLUS GOLD / **NOISE:** CYBENETICS STANDARD+ (35-40 DBA) / **COOLING:** 120MM FDB FAN (S1201512HB) / **MODULARITY:** FULLY MODULAR



WE HOPE IT'S CHIPS

Just why are computer parts so hard to get hold of right now?

Tried buying a GPU lately? Chances are that you've been disappointed, faced either with dwindling stock levels or enormous prices on that well-known online auction site. And it's not just PC gamers who are feeling the pinch – stocks of PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X/S consoles are at rock bottom, and even car makers and tumble dryer manufacturers are having trouble getting hold of the right amount of silicon to create their products.

There are a few hypotheses about why this has happened, from large ships stuck in small canals, to Brexit making it generally harder (and more expensive) for the UK to import electronics, to Chinese chip manufacturers increasing their stockpiles of in-demand chips, decreasing their availability on the open market. Then there's the small matter of COVID-19.

It was back in April this year that the Guardian, 200-year-old sage of the technology world, announced the shortage was at 'crisis point', while in May CNN stated it was going from 'bad to worse' – quoting Ford in the process, which is having to reduce its car output by 10% because of the lack of microchips, and parked 10,000 unfinished vehicles at the Kentucky Raceway, waiting for the chips to arrive to finish them off. The value of some used cars have risen as much as 10% thanks to the

shortage, and anyone who's tried to sell an outdated GPU already knows it's possible to sell used for the price of new.

A big part of the problem is demand. Chips are in everything these days, as 'smart' has become a buzzword for toasters as much as speakers, and they are increasingly used in cars as well as the usual phones, PCs, and routers. Manufacturers of such items often keep a stash of chips in stock, and so there has been some panic buying to ensure that these stockpiles are kept up.

There's also a trade war going on between the US and China. In 2020 the US government placed restrictions on China's biggest chip maker Semiconductor Manufacturing International Corporation (SMIC) that made it harder for it to sell to US companies. Firms left without chips by this turned to other companies, such as TSMC (which produces 70% of the world's automotive microcontrollers) and Samsung (which has had to delay the launch of its Note smartphone) to fulfil their needs. The sanctions were brought in by the Trump administration, but President Biden has no plans to end them, even though they are negatively affecting the US economy. Imports of chips into the US are essential, as US semiconductor companies account for 47% of global chip sales, but only 12% of global chip manufacturing.

"The tariffs are likely to be met with retaliation from US business partners and completely miss the point" as China is mostly kept out of range. They have the potential to become



Make more chips?

Due to the just-in-time supply chains used in both car-making and graphics card manufacture, chip fabs generally don't have spare capacity sat doing nothing. Orders are placed in advance, and the plant works to fulfil them from its annual capacity.

CHIPS IN THE NIGHT

What's the shortage affecting?

Image credit: Intel Corporation

CPUs

Intel has been struggling to get a working 10nm process after its dependence on 14nm. Alder Lake could be here this year, but shortages may affect shipments.

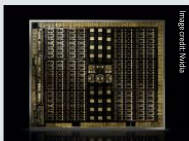


Image credit: Nvidia

GPUs

Not just for gaming. GPUs are the backbone of the supercomputer and data centre worlds, and their needs may be greater than your desire for ray tracing.



Image credit: Apple

SoCs

Apple stated that the shortage is hampering its production of Macs and iPads and could cost it up to \$4bn in sales, and it's the world's fourth largest seller of laptops.



Image credit: Michael Ivener

MICROCONTROLLERS

Simple boards like this Raspberry Pi Pico are everywhere. They don't have to use the latest tech, but they're stamped out of silicon wafers like everything else.



Image credit: Reuters



TOP: The inside of a chip factory looks pretty much like you'd expect it to.

ABOVE: The container ship Ever Given stuck in the Suez Canal in Egypt, viewed from the ISS.

highly inflammatory and to undermine the global economic expansion," Stefan Koopman, market economist at Rabobank, told Reuters.

And then there's something called the 'Asian Squeeze', which sounds like an act you'd pay a lot of money for in Soho but just means there was underinvestment in chip plants based mostly in Asia, which have had a hard time keeping up with demand as the popularity of things like 5G phones and iPads increased more rapidly than predicted. Thanks to COVID, the shift to stay-at-home working pushed demand for PCs up by 13% in 2020, with that predicted to rise to 18% in 2021 according to figures from Nikkei Asia.

FROZEN OUT

The weather doesn't help. A cold snap in Texas cut the electricity to chip-making plants there, and a drought has hit Taiwan, home of TSMC (chip manufacturing requires thousands of tons of water a day). That country also has a historically fraught relationship with China. "You have an entire global electronics supply chain that is dependent on Taiwan, and it's 100 miles offshore of China," Stacy Rasgon, a semiconductor analyst at the financial services firm AllianceBernstein, told the Washington Post. "Given everything going on with geopolitical tensions, that's becoming a strategically untenable position."

There's more. Cryptocurrency mining has pushed GPU demand up. The Ever Given, hilariously wedged in the Suez Canal for a week back in March, and at the time of writing still at anchor in Egypt's Great Bitter Lake (very much not where it should be) while its owners work out how to pay \$900 million

in damages, contains 18,000 shipping containers with electronics their most common cargo.

The ship's impressive attempt to make international trade entertaining also delayed tens of thousands more containers, causing some ships to risk sailing through the notoriously pirate-infested waters off Somalia on their way round the southern tip of Africa. Ships without on-board 'security teams' (there's a euphemism) must divert further, adding three days to a journey already lengthened by 11 days. Fuel for the trip runs at around \$30,000 per day, and late fees can be the same, according to the New York Times.

So what is being done about it? Despite his disinclination to roll back those Trump-era sanctions on China, President Biden has asked for \$50 billion to invest in chip manufacturing within the US, and four new chip fabs are planned – two for Intel and one for TSMC in Arizona, and one for Samsung in Texas. The Chinese government also has its foot on the money pump, offering subsidies for its home-grown industry to ramp up production and reduce the country's reliance on imported chips.

Much like the Ever Given, though, the industry will take a little while to turn around. Chip fabs can take two years to get up and running, and Intel's CEO Pat Gelsinger pointed to a similar timeframe when speaking to the Washington Post, "We do believe we have the ability to help, [but] I think this is a couple of years until you are totally able to address it," he said.

Intel hopes to boost its production of chips within nine months, but that seems to leave the rest of us waiting two years for a new graphics card. ■

Ian Evenden

THE SHIFT TO STAY-AT-HOME WORKING PUSHED DEMAND FOR PCS UP BY 13%

YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick the parts you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£600

MOTHERBOARD		A320M-A Pro MSI £42 Everything you need and nothing else. This MSI motherboard is simple but it works. And that's all we can ask for at this price.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 5 3400G AMD £130 Capable budget CPU and GPU in one tiny package, and it also comes with its very own CPU cooler.
GRAPHICS CARD		None This build is tailored to today's GPU shortage. But don't fret, once cards are back in stock you could slot one in to this PC for an upgrade.
COOLER		Wraith Spire AMD Free with CPU The Wraith Stealth is a great cooler made even better by the fact it comes free with our choice of chip. Budget heaven.
MEMORY		Vegeance LPX 8GB (2x 4GB) DDR4-3000 Corsair £39 For gaming we only really need 8GB of RAM, and this stuff is quick to boot.
POWER SUPPLY		MWE White 400W Cooler Master £39 Small by today's standards, this PSU from a trustworthy manufacturer offers plenty of juice for this build and a little more.
SSD		MX500 500GB Crucial £57 One of the best value SATA SSDs you can buy and plenty fast enough for a snappy OS.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £37 You don't necessarily need a HDD in 2020, but if you're a virtual hoarder, this'll give you loads of useful extra space.
CASE		Neos BitFenix £36 You'll want to minimise how often you rebuild your PC, so make sure to give it a good home. This case'll do nicely.
DISPLAY		GW2280 BenQ £105 A 1080p60 VA monitor will see you through in style and, once you upgrade, will make a superb second monitor.
KEYBOARD		G213 Logitech £40 It may be a membrane switch board, but it's stylish, and well-built. Sometimes that's worth more than cheap clicky switches.
MOUSE		G102 Logitech £35 A classic shape delivered in a sleek shell, this mouse fits all hand sizes and grips. A solid option for the money.
HEADSET		HS35 Corsair £40 This headset delivers in-game with its punchy drivers and clear microphone – perfect for video calls and multiplayer alike.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,438

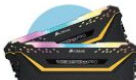
MOTHERBOARD		B450 Tomahawk Max MSI £120 A reliable platform for your build, the Tomahawk Max also comes in black to complement any style.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 5 3600X AMD £198 This CPU is one of the greats, and uses the Zen 2 architecture to dominate in gaming and productivity.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 3060 Ti Founders Ed. Nvidia £369 The RTX 3060 Ti is a little overkill but we're willing to make sacrifices elsewhere to make it work.
COOLER		Wraith Spire AMD Free with the CPU We love a freebie, especially one as capable as the cooler included with the 3600X. This'll keep your machine running smoothly.
MEMORY		Ballistix 16GB DDR4 (2x8GB) Crucial £75 With plenty of capacity at 16GB, this unembellished memory has everything you need for gaming and more.
POWER SUPPLY		CX650M Corsair £93 The heart of your gaming PC is your PSU, and this 650W Corsair promises to keep your rig ticking nicely.
SSD		S70 1TB Addlink £70 Building on a budget doesn't mean sacrificing speed – the Addlink S70 proves you can indeed have both.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £37 Just like in the budget build, this HDD isn't strictly necessary, but for a pretty low price it's nice to have plenty of extra space.
CASE		Eclipse P400S TG Phanteks £70 An ATX case is all you need for this build. We like this one because it's simple, functional, and really nice to look at.
DISPLAY		AOC G2590FX AOC £173 Everything a PC gamer could want: Full HD, 144Hz refresh rate, 1ms response time, AMD FreeSync and Nvidia G-Sync compatible.
KEYBOARD		Alloy FPS HyperX £80 As the name suggests, this keyboard is built like an absolute tank, with a steel frame and Cherry MX switches.
MOUSE		Model O- Glorious £59 Lightweight and responsive, the Model O- has made a name for itself among streamers and pros thanks to its clever design.
HEADSET		Blackshark V2 Razer £94 The Blackshark V2 offers up some killer audio quality to rival the greats. And at a reasonable price too.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



TOTAL
£3,666

MOTHERBOARD		MPG Z490 Gaming Carbon WiFi MSI £260 A heady mix of enthusiast motherboard functionality and build quality that stops short of god-tier motherboard pricing.
PROCESSOR		Core i9 10900K Intel £529 If you want the fastest gaming CPU, look no further than Intel's flagship Core i9.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 3080 Founders Edition Nvidia £649 The RTX 3080 is the flagship graphics card of an entire new GPU generation.
COOLER		Kraken X63 NZXT £123 One of the most stunning AIO coolers rebuilt with an updated pump and, of course, RGB lighting for more pizzazz.
MEMORY		Vengeance RGB Pro 32GB DDR4 (2x16GB) @ 3,200 Corsair £176 If you truly want to show off, even your system memory should be aglow with RGB.
POWER SUPPLY		SuperNOVA 1000 G5 Gold EVGA £200 This calibre of gaming PC draws a lot of power. Thankfully, this PSU can handle it with high efficiency.
SSD		WD Black SN750 1TB Western Digital £169 Western Digital is back on Samsung's heels with this brilliantly fast, yet affordable, 1TB M.2 NVMe SSD.
HDD		860 QVO 2TB Samsung £195 Built on QLC flash memory, it's not the quickest storage around, but it's a speedy alternative to an HDD.
CASE		600C Corsair £135 If you're going big on parts, you should grab a case that has plenty of room for upgrades down the line. This one will do just fine.
DISPLAY		Nitro XV273K Acer £780 This one's an easy choice – 4K and 144Hz for under a grand is an offer we can't refuse, and neither should you.
KEYBOARD		G915 Lightspeed Logitech £210 Low-profile mechanical switches are just the icing on the cake that is the superb, wireless Logitech G915.
MOUSE		G502 Lightspeed Logitech £110 With a lengthy battery life and a phenomenal sensor to keep you gaming at your best, the G502 is undoubtedly one of the finest.
HEADSET		Arctis 7 Wireless SteelSeries £130 If you've settled on a wireless keyboard and mouse, the last thing you want is a pesky cable to your headset.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING

Ah, Summer 2007. The time where I was going through that faceless blob phase.

“Imagine trying to explain ‘I Can Has Cheezburger?’ to someone now”

Tripping through time with **EMILY IS AWAY <3**

Cast your mind back to a time when Facebook was in its infancy. An inconspicuous social media site where unsolicited posts from racist uncles, data mining advertising, and deceitful catfish personas were non-existent. It was a more innocent time where we were all still figuring out how to communicate digitally.

It's a piece of internet culture that's particularly hard to articulate, but the visual novel *Emily Is Away <3* manages to capture the habits and language of a bygone era. The first two games in the trilogy took place in AIM chat windows, and this third in the trio takes place in 2008 over Facebook. Oops, I mean 'Facenook'.

Playing as a high schooler in their senior year, you and your friends are

RACHEL WATTS



THIS MONTH
Got told by an 18 year old that my music taste was “basic”.

ALSO PLAYED
Mundaun,
Phasmophobia

trying to figure out life's next steps while grappling with this new era of social media. You can click on people's profiles, get tagged in photos, start a poke war, and post Paramore song lyrics on friend's walls. As much as these pseudo social media interactions make for surprisingly vivid throwbacks, it's *Emily Is Away <3*'s chats where I found the most nostalgia, specifically, the linguistic authenticity that developer Kyle Seeley has managed to tune in to.

The story branches out entirely through these simulated

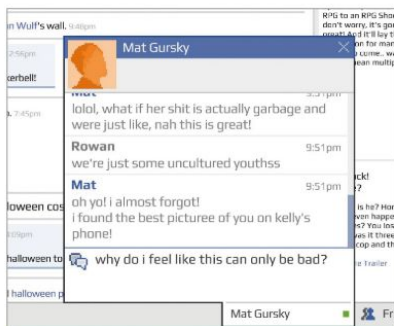
UPPER RIGHT:
Switching between two or more chat windows is more than my brain can handle.

conversations as you try and navigate your way through the messy interconnected relationships of your teenage friendship group.

DESKTOP DRAMA

The way that these characters speak to each other is a trip down memory lane. For those who grew up online, *Emily Is Away <3* is like a time capsule. The dialogue, cultural references, and memes are all so firmly situated in the time period not even the Rosetta Stone could decipher it. Imagine trying to explain 'I Can Has Cheezburger?' to someone now. It's utterly absurd.

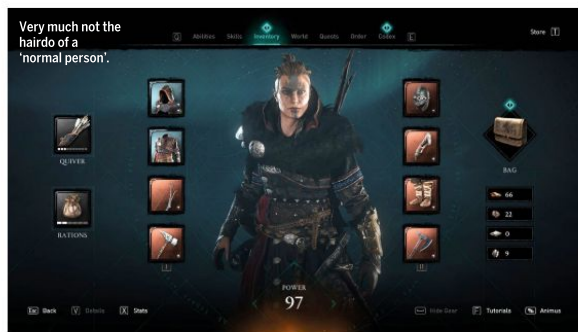
THE WAY THESE CHARACTERS SPEAK TO EACH OTHER IS A TRIP DOWN MEMORY LANE



Even the way the teens type is nostalgic. Awkward, stylistic spelling, weird word flourishes, and a complete disregard for capital letters run rampant in these text chats. I am guilty of using most, if not all, of these back in 2008 and some still slip into my online vocab when chatting to friends over a decade later.

It's not just feel-good nostalgia in *Emily is Away* <3, it also recalls the anxieties that come with chatting through a small text window without seeing the other person's face – anxieties that are still prevalent today. With many of us having to adapt to working from home the past year it feels somewhat like a return to those early days of talking online. Even the dreaded 'Emily is typing' message at the bottom of the chat window is the equivalent to seeing those three little bouncing dots on a majority of today's virtual chats. It just shows how trying to connect to people online now is still just as hard now as it was back then.

I may not relate to the teen drama in *Emily is Away* <3's story, but I see myself in the ways that these teens communicate, the anxieties of text chats, and trying to work out how to connect with each other in the internet age. ■



“Constantly going on surreal vision quests”

The new normal of **ASSASSIN'S CREED VALHALLA**

ROBIN VALENTINE



THIS MONTH
Killed a lot of Saxons while high on psychedelic mushrooms.

ALSO PLAYED
Hades,
Watch Dogs Legion

Have you noticed how weird Assassin's Creed has gotten? I feel like I'm the only one who has. The strangeness has been creeping in since the move to the ancient world with *Origins*, but in *Valhalla* it feels like it's found its surreal voice.

I'm not talking weird in the way they used to be, with overblown sci-fi plots where you'd end up fistfighting the Pope over alien technology, or discover the office IT guy was a reincarnated pirate. The series has frequently been ridiculous, but only in the way videogames tend to be. It wasn't properly *weird*.

Eivor, the hero of *Assassin's Creed Valhalla*, is a blunt and serious Viking, accustomed to raiding, pillaging, and stabbing blokes with swords. But she's also a strangely mystical figure, who always seems to have one foot in some supernatural realm.

VERSES MODE

A staple of the series is post-death chats – after you stab an important target, they get to say their piece before they gasp their last. In *Valhalla*, these scenes play out like

surreal Nordic theatre, your targets speaking in verse as they flee through a field of ghosts or get devoured by a tree. Odin offers wry commentary as Eivor strides towards them and destroys their soul with a touch.

Elsewhere you're constantly going on similarly surreal vision quests and drug trips, battling underexplained supernatural forces and stumbling into confusing, fairytale-like events. But the funny thing is, I think it ends up making the game feel *more* historically authentic.

Not more *accurate*, of course. I'm not going to claim the Vikings genuinely could talk to their gods if they ate enough special mushrooms. But it's the sort of thing you could imagine *they* believed, along with countless other little things that we know to be impossible, but they thought might be fact. This atmosphere of mythic surrealism and blurry lines between the real and unreal does make me feel like I'm seeing the world through a Viking's eyes, rather than a modern historian's. And, at least for me, that's much more interesting than pure historical fact – or, indeed, whatever alien conspiracy is supposed to be happening this time round. ■



“If there’s a ridiculous-sounding upgrade, you can be sure I’ll take it.”

Watching the world burn and melt and shatter in chaotic roguelike **NOITA**

There’s something oddly comforting about an underworld, exploring caves and tombs that people are not supposed to be in, seeing things we’re not meant to see – like a big floating eye-bat that spits streams of corrosive acid.

I’ve been playing *Noita*, which is a roguelike about ruining things. The anonymous wizard you control is descending deeper into a mysterious cave, while trying to avoid – or gleefully trigger – the many environmental hazards sitting temptingly in their way. These include, but are not limited to, big pits of lava, puddles of acid, explosive barrels, and mounds of gunpowder. I should be giving them the widest berth, as I would do in real life, but in *Noita* I am my opposite: I’m not afraid to make decisions, even in the knowledge that the outcomes will be terrible. Every time you die in *Noita*, it informs you of your cause of death, whether you caught fire, drowned, or shot yourself with your own projectile. But, really, it should just put ‘you couldn’t resist’.

TOM SYKES



THIS MONTH
Dived into a subterranean world, and died.

ALSO PLAYED
Loop Hero,
The Last Spell

You couldn’t resist shooting that barrel, just to watch the acid eat through the floor. You couldn’t resist pinging that lamp, to see fire consume the wooden decking. Never mind that it’s in your way, and now the fire is spreading – hey, it’s burning away the acid. That’s neat, you think, as the fire consumes you.

NOITA LOT

I haven’t made it very far into *Noita*. I’m sure I’ll never spelunk to the farthest reaches of its perilous cavern. That’s OK, because I’m in this for the interaction, and the atmosphere of

this subterranean world. There’s something about a closed ecosystem, a simulated underground, that appeals to me. It’s a sandbox, but not too sandboxy, with reassuring borders to contain the chaos – and send your bouncing magic projectiles right back at you. Other games have captured this feeling, including *Ultima Underworld* and its spiritual successor, *Arx Fatalis*.

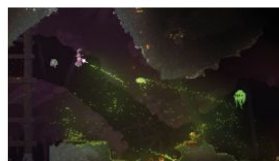
These games have a rebellious descendent in *Noita*, which is not so much about living in the underworld as being a clod-footed interloper, causing chaos with your every footstep, with every run-running act of ‘oh, what the hell’.

If there’s a ridiculous-sounding upgrade, you can be sure I’ll take it. Like the time my wand’s projectiles were replaced with a stream of boulders. Or the upgrade that caused my wand to emit a stream of plasma. The real world, the outside world, can sometimes seem too vast for us to really grasp how we’re affecting it, but in the enclosed world of *Noita*, our actions are reassuringly predictable: they’ll cause things to explode, melt, or disintegrate into a thousand tiny pixels. ■

I’M SURE I’LL NEVER SPELUNK TO THE FARTHEST REACHES OF ITS PERILOUS CAVERN



There’s a world above, most of it tantalisingly out of reach.



LEFT: I love how fluid collects in nooks and crannies on the ground.

BELOW: Fire spreads quickly, and even produces clouds of rising smoke.





“I always thought it was cheating, but she said she was channelling Caesar”

TOTAL WAR: ROME REMASTERED puts date 2004 into our collective debug console

The original *Total War: Rome* was a huge part of my life in the mid-2000s. Not only did it get me through a lengthy stay in hospital, but it was also the game of choice of my neurodivergent daughter as she grew up. She played it, modded it, broke it, and bent it to her will. Her armies were suddenly vast and improbable, her coffers splitting with Denarii and her enemies cowering at the mention of her name. I always thought it was cheating, but she said she was channelling Julius Caesar. Living in a world where social norms and the ignorance of others made her life needlessly difficult, *Rome*, as well as its modding community, gave her control, power, and a place.

It was also our thing. Amongst all the challenges that life threw at us both, we'd always had hoplites and phalanxes to discuss. When Windows 10 came and took *Rome* away for good, it felt a bit like a death in the family. I moved on to *Rome II*

MATT KILLEEN



THIS MONTH
Considered the Stoic Philosophers.

ALSO PLAYED
Per Aspera, Lego Star Wars: The Force Awakens

but that left her cold. ‘Gaining a tactical advantage’ was now an overly complex endeavour. There was no way to summon the casual and arbitrary chaos of the gods, and that, she told me, was half the fun.

That little girl is now a grown woman with other fish to fry, but the game getting remastered called us both, babbling about the Marian Reforms and wardrobe malfunctions. Of course, nostalgia is the vice of the aged, so what could it offer her, especially if she couldn't take it apart?

SHE COULD BE EIGHT AGAIN, EXCEPT SHE'S HOLDING A VODKA AND COKE

NEW TRICKS

Thankfully the game can still be messed with by the old-school methods, but she is dismissive of the quality-of-life improvements.

“They’ve streamlined the UI. I can’t find anything,” she complained. “You still can’t fight as the Roman rebels or the Senate, and, still, there’s no way of playing on from the Sons of Mars tutorial!” She could be eight again, except she’s holding a vodka and coke.

There are unlocked factions and any number of additions, but it seems these had already been available to the knowledgeable. Otherwise, this remaster is faithful in odd ways. The camera is better, but the new textures and models still look the wrong kind of ancient in 4K. Philosopher Seneca said, “Hang on to your youthful enthusiasms – you’ll be able to use them better when you’re older.” So, we made our sacrifice to Venus, via the console and spamming the add. money 40000 command, and then bribed, bought, and corrupted the world into submission, as we had 15 years before, giggling all the way. ■

HARDSPACE: SHIPBREAKER

The addictive ship salvage sim gets its first major update. *By Andy Kelly*

Some of my favourite games feel like a second job. Ferrying cargo between systems in *Elite Dangerous*, doing shifts on the forklift in *Shermoe*, driving a truck around Europe in *Euro Truck Simulator 2*. So I always knew *Shipbreaker* would appeal to me. It's a game about a regular working stiff on a mission to clear a mountain of debt by scrapping disused spaceships. It might all be taking place in a rich, vividly realised sci-fi setting, but you're still clocking in for the nine to five and breaking your back for The Man.

I love this about it. Science fiction games rarely focus on what it's like just *existing* in these settings, and it's refreshing to spend time in a universe like this without being a hotshot fighter pilot, a space knight, or the chosen one. You're just some person. One of thousands of shipbreakers bobbing around in orbit, quietly turning abandoned old starships into the precious raw materials required to make new ones.

If you've never played *Shipbreaker*, it's pretty simple. You're an astronaut floating around a huge orbital platform above the Earth. Below you there's a barge for storing expensive, reusable items like airlocks, chairs, and control panels. To your left and right, a recycler and a furnace. The furnace is for melting down cheap, soft metal; the recycler is for more advanced materials. In the middle, a ship. It could be a large cargo vessel or a small one-person station hopper. And it's your job to tear it apart using a variety of tools, and toss the carved off parts into these three receptacles.

THEM'S THE BREAKS

It's the salvage process that makes the game so satisfying. Using a laser to cut the ships apart, and a tether to sling the parts through zero-G into the furnace, barge, or recycler is wonderfully tactile. It's a long process and genuinely hard work, but it's

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE June 16, 2020	DEVELOPER Blackbird Interactive
PUBLISHER Focus Home	LINK bit.ly/3pildqo

supposed to be. Your job in this fictional universe is a difficult one, and that's reflected in the simulation.

Shipbreaker has been in Early Access since June 2020, and the updates have been pretty frequent, albeit small. But the latest patch, titled *Salvage Your Future*, is the biggest yet. It adds the first chunk of a fully voiced campaign, a vastly improved tutorial for new players, a greater variety of randomised ships to scrap, and a long list of tweaks and improvements we'd need another four pages to print in full. If you've been holding off, waiting for a more complete experience, this is as good a time as any to dive in.

The campaign follows your faceless shipbreaker as they learn the ropes and begin to work off their debt, which is in the *billions*, to the LYNX Corporation. The game is pure satire, presenting a tongue-in-cheek

future where capitalism has spiralled wildly out of control. The fact that you'll realistically never be able to work off that debt before you die is a statement in and of itself. "We read the news and talk about what it's like to live in our current capitalist society, the knock-on effects, and how that affects working and workers'



THE SALVAGE PROCESS MAKES THE GAME SO SATISFYING

rights," game director Elliot Hudson told us in an interview.

The way the story is presented, at least in this first chapter, isn't very complex. It happens mostly via radio messages, which play as you busy yourself tearing ships apart. There's a large cast of characters, including fellow shipbreakers, which makes your job feel less lonely. It's like listening to a radio play more than taking part in a narrative, but it adds colour to the setting and some of the characters are pretty interesting. In this build the voice acting is placeholder while the developer figures out how to structure the story.

A big new feature in the *Salvage Your Future* update is ship variety. Previously, the relatively small selection of spacecraft on offer got old pretty fast. But now there are more variations, each with their own salvage challenges, aesthetic, and shapes. "We noticed that the ships all kinda felt the same, even if they were named different things and were meant to have different roles," says Hudson. "But now industrial ships feel quite different from the transport ships, and civilian ships feel different from science ships."

They've done a good job here, but call me greedy: I'd love to see *even more* variety in future updates. It can be disheartening to spend ages dismantling a ship, then the next one in line is almost identical to it. ■

SHIP SHAPE

Some of the starships you can salvage



JAVELIN / REFUELING
This large industrial ship, as the name suggests, is loaded with highly dangerous fuel tanks.



MACKEREL / EXOLAB
This research vessel is pretty small, but is full of expensive (and reusable) scientific equipment.

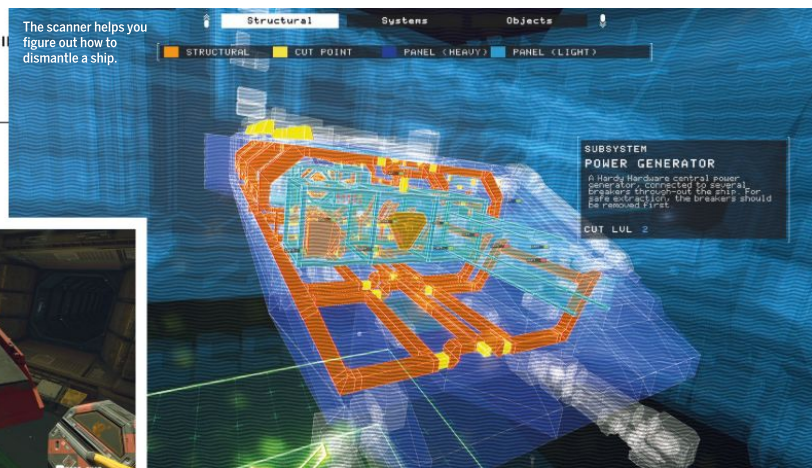


MACKEREL / LIGHT CARGO
This is one of the first ships you'll work on, and the most basic. You can rip it apart fairly easily.



GECKO / STARGAZER
This science vessel is stuffed with hazardous objects, including explosive hydroponic research.

The scanner helps you figure out how to dismantle a ship.



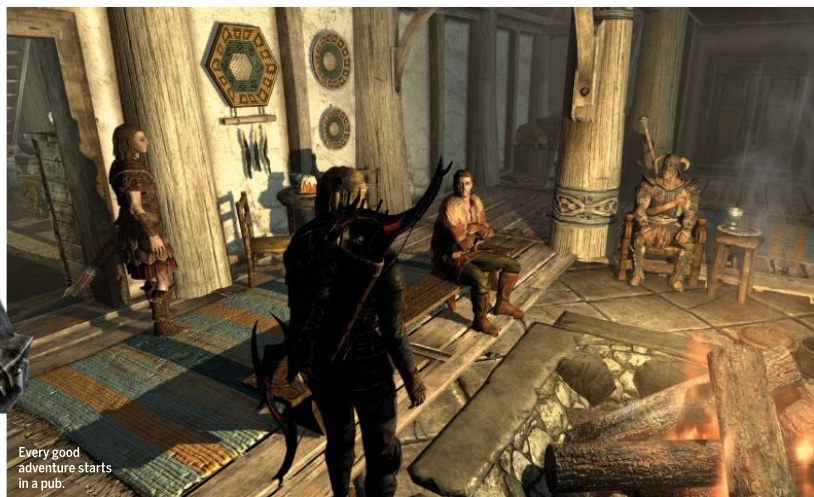
FAR LEFT: The yellow structure in the middle is where you live.

LEFT: One of the bigger ships you have to scrap.



Moving a large piece of scrap with the tether tool.

This dragon has a plan.



Every good
adventure starts
in a pub.

WYRMSTOOTH

Enjoy the triumphant return of an expansion-sized mod for *Skyrim*. *By Christopher Livingston*



BELOW: An Oblivion gate! Remember those things?

BOTTOM: My ragtag group of misfits, bless 'em.



It's not unheard of, but still pretty rare, that a massive and popular mod for a game simply disappears.

But it happened with *Wyrmsmouth*, an expansion-sized mod for *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. It arrived in 2012, but was abruptly removed from modding sites by its creator in 2016. For years, players could really only acquire it by sharing the files with each other. There were a few rumours, but no one was exactly sure why the mod vanished.

In February of 2021, *Wyrmsmouth's* creator, Jonx0r, officially re-uploaded the mod. Since I missed my chance to play it before it disappeared, I decided not to make the same mistake twice. I'm not just happy it reappeared, I'm happy I played it.

In *Wyrmsmouth*, dragons aren't just an occasional terror filling the sky and making some random NPCs' lives a living hell. One dragon in particular is doing more than just dive-bombing farms and Imperial camps. It's disrupting business by repeatedly attacking a mining colony and burning ships transporting goods across the sea from the colony to Skyrim. So, it makes sense that the East Empire Trading company,

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE November, 2011	DEVELOPER Bethesda Game Studios
PUBLISHER Bethesda Softworks	LINK elderscrolls.bethesda.net

feeling the pinch in its pocketbook from all that lost income, would hire someone capable of dealing with dragons: the Dragonborn. That's me!

YOU MEET IN A TAVERN

I'm approached in Whiterun, and told a man would like to make my acquaintance at The Bannered Mare. Where else could a rollicking quest begin but a pub? I meet Lurios Liore, who lays it all out for me. He's got a bag of gold with my name on it if I can kill the dragon that's costing his employers so much money. I'm already wealthy, but it never hurts to add a bit more coin to the pile.



WHERE ELSE COULD A ROLICKING QUEST BEGIN BUT A PUB?

It feels like the start of an action movie, really. Liore tells me there's a ragtag group of mercenaries on their way to deal with the dragon already, and I might be able to intercept them somewhere around Falkreath. Sure enough, I find the merry band on the road near Bonechill Passage. One is a gruff orc who says he kills people who ask too many questions. Another is a Redguard from Hammerfell who left Alik'r for a life of adventures. The third is a Bosmer archer who tangled with the Thalmor but eventually fled to Skyrim when the heat of the conflict got to be a bit too much. If we weren't setting out to kill a

CAREER CHANGE

A bit tired of being the Dragonborn? Try these mods



UNDEATH

How about unleashing some evil? Become a lich and summon an army of undead.



FACTION: PIT FIGHTER

If you yearn for the arena, become a pit fighter and survive brutal tournaments.



THE FORGOTTEN CITY

How about a detective? Solve a murder in a mysterious city.



HEIJARCHEN FARM

Maybe it's the quiet life for you. Become a farmer and retire altogether.

➤ dragon, it'd be the perfect group for a heist, or maybe a dance competition to raise money for an orphanage.

Surprisingly enough, we reach the massive dragon at the top of the peak, and it seems like this action movie will end before it's even got a chance to start. Rather than fighting, the dragon, called Vulthurkrah, simply talks to me, telling me he's been expecting me and daring me to follow him to the island of Wyrnstooth. Then it flies off without a single blast of cold breath in my direction. Curious! After a brief meeting with Liore back at Whiterun to fill him in on the failed expedition, I head to Solitude where the team of adventurers is waiting on a ship. Together we sail through the mists to Wyrnstooth, even though it's pretty clear we're heading into a trap.

And Wyrnstooth is a big, big place. The island map is massive, and *Wyrnstooth* definitely feels like it could be proper DLC for *Skyrim*. There's a great landmass to explore, including frozen mountains, sunken bogs, forts, campsites, dungeons, and more. As we run across Wyrnstooth to invade the dragon's lair, every hill we crest gives me a look at some distant landmark I'd like to visit.

It's not easy to run around a huge island and not investigate every single thing I see, but I want to deal with Vulthurkrah before doing anything else. We reach the mining colony, which is on fire – the nasty dragon hasn't been idle. Pushing deeper into the island, we come across two great dragons, though neither of them are the mighty dragon we're looking for. But there's still a long, difficult battle to take them both down, even with my party of misfits to help out.

TWO FOR ONE

Eventually we defeat the twin dragons, and I take a moment to catch my breath (and inhale their souls) before we enter Vulthurkrah's lair. Guarded by high-level bandits and filled to the brim with draugr and other horrors, it's an astoundingly intricate labyrinth.

Once we're inside we find ourselves faced with traps, head-scratching puzzles, and no shortage of powerful undead creatures, giant spiders, and sometimes bandits and other adventurers to defeat. I become more and more grateful I've got a collection of mercenaries at my side or I'm sure I wouldn't make it, Dragonborn or not.

And there's another strange twist. While making our way through the winding labyrinth to reach the dragon, we run into a curious problem. A mage named Alberthor has been experimenting with a spell that lets him possess and control draugrs, but while practising his spell, one of the draugrs bumped into a switch and sealed off the way forward. Alberthor casts the spell on me, and I get to take control of the draugr myself, operating it like a remote-controlled puppet, in order to find the gate's switch and give it another bump so we can proceed.

The dungeon goes on and on, and it's actually pretty difficult to describe just how big it really is, from cobweb-cloaked stone passages to dwemer ruins to massive caverns with ceilings so high it feels like we're outdoors. We fight through lava-strewn caves bristling with falmer and creep through canyon-like chambers filled with jellyfish-like netch. There's rarely a moment where I don't look around and go, "Wow, this is great."

And finally, finally we reach the mighty Vulthurkrah, who explains his reason for inviting me here. I won't spoil it, other than to say old Vulty doesn't have a terrible plan, really. Heck, if I were an evil dragon I'd be 100% on board with it.

Once again, Vulthurkrah delays our inevitable throwdown by doing an alarming bit of magic and smashing through the ceiling of the cave. My friends and I are left to fight for our lives, which I'm unhappy to say we lost, several times, before I

eventually reloaded my save and figured out how to escape the trap that had been set for us.

And there is, at long last, a proper final confrontation with the ancient dragon. Do I eat his soul? Sure. It was always going to happen. I'm the Dragonborn, and snacking on dragon souls is pretty much my whole thing. But with that main quest behind me, there's still an entire unexplored island – it's a massive one too – waiting. And there's still a bunch to do, over a dozen sidequests and plenty of other encounters, most of them hostile...



WE FIGHT THROUGH CAVES BRISTLING WITH FALMER

TOOTH ACHE

Wyrnstooth is home to more than just dragon-singed miners and Imperials. I found a legion of Thalmor warriors hoping to make inroads on the island in the far north. A pack of werewolves ambushed me while I was investigating a cabin buried in the snow. I have a new pet now, a friendly wolf that I acquired during one small adventure and another big misadventure. There are a few big orc settlements, bandits galore and I even stumbled across an amazing and nostalgic sight: an old and defunct Oblivion gate. I haven't seen one of those in years. There were even some plants from *Oblivion*, like spiddal stick, growing nearby. I guess when the gate was active, some seeds slipped through and began to grow in our world. It's another cool touch from an impressive mod.

If you're looking for a big, sprawling adventure with a whole bunch of characters and one hell of a massive dungeon, you should definitely check out *Wyrnstooth*. I had an absolute blast with it, and even after hours of playing there's still tons more of the island I've yet to explore, including an entire abandoned Imperial fort that you can claim, move into, and repair. And *Wyrnstooth* does a lot to make dragons feel incredibly powerful and threatening again, which is really important in *Skyrim*. Especially if, like me, you've killed so many at this point they really don't even raise an eyebrow anymore. ■

SHOUT IT OUT

Some dragons shouts we'd like to see



"FUS RO D'OH"

For when you accidentally use Unrelenting Force on a companion.

"FO KRAH DRINK"

Like Frost Breath, but just adds some ice cubes to your mead.

"UI KLO TIID"

The opposite of Slow Time. This one massively speeds up loading screens.



Very happy
I've got backup
with me.



ABOVE: Pesky dragons are really causing a stir.

LEFT: I guess I'm meant to jump into this.



There are lots of
fully voiced new
characters.



STAY ALIVE IN

RESIDENT EVIL VILLAGE

Survive Lady Dimitrescu and friends in Ethan Winters' latest adventure. *By Harry Shepherd*

NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY

Easy

TIME

Ten hours

VITAL LINKS

Money tips:

bit.ly/3opgicQ

Boss walkthrough:

bit.ly/2S4FzH3

Hunting guide:

bit.ly/2Ruobvl

EXAM SEASON

1 Closely examine everything you pick up. Once you get an item, examine it by finding it in your inventory. Look carefully at the object from all angles and you may find an extra item you'll need to progress.



FULL SET

2 Examining items may give you a treasure you can pair with another to sell for a higher price with the game's merchant. Treasures that are just a doll's head, for example, tend to have others that can be combined with it.



TRIGGER HAPPY

3 If you find a better version of a gun, sell the worse one. You'll save on precious inventory space, be able to sell the old gun for a higher price if you invested cash to upgrade it, and use the same ammo.



RED OR BLUE

4 You can tell you've fully cleared an area of loot by checking your map: blue means complete, red means there's more to gather. However, you may not always have the items to get everything the first time around.



TWINKLE TWINKLE

5 One reason you may not have completely pilfered a room is that there's a Crystal Fragment hidden somewhere. These glimmering dots are easy to miss, but it's worth your while to shoot them down and cash them in with The Duke.



KEEP GOING

6 Another reason is that you haven't progressed far enough. The village is full of wells, locked doors, and secrets that can't be solved until you've played through more of the game. Don't worry about moving on: you'll return here several times.



GOOD SPOT

7 Don't rush head-first into new areas. You'll often find that if you take the time to pause and survey the area ahead, you'll be able to take out enemies from afar. The rifle found in Castle Dimitrescu is perfect for this.

FULL MOON *How to survive a pack of vicious lycans*



1

MOVE CABINETS

Shelving near doors marked in yellow can be moved to block doorways. While the invaders are halted in their tracks, thin out the pack by lining up some quick headshots.

3

GEAR UP

Lycans aren't that quick, so don't panic, and take the time to search for loot. For example, don't miss the shotgun in the first major fight.

2

AIM SMARTLY

While successful shots to the brain are effective against any werewolf, aim for the arm to make them drop their weapon, or the kneecaps to slow them down.



KNIFE WORK

8 Save your ammo by using your knife to destroy breakable objects. The blade you get at the beginning isn't much use against enemies (don't even think about trying it against a group), but it's fine to use to grab hidden goodies.



DARTS AND CRAFTS

9 While it's nice to have plentiful ammo reserves, don't spend your materials on creating more straight away. You may find situations require a different kind of ammunition or weapon type, and you don't want to be caught short.



CIRCLE OF LIFE

10 Hunt all animals you can find. Handing their meat to The Duke could reward you with a meal, which you can eat to gain permanent buffs. Your map indicates when you've killed all of each animal type in an area.



FIGHT OR FLIGHT

11 When all else fails, run for it. Most enemies you'll come up against aren't especially fast and can be strafed around in many cases. You'll realise your health isn't high if you're caught in a corner, so retreat if necessary.



ON GUARD

12 If you don't have the space to take flight, use Space to guard. You will take some health penalty, but raising your arms to defend yourself mitigates the damage you would've suffered otherwise. Find an intuitive health potion hotkey, too.



DIARY

PERSONAL ADVENTURES IN GAMES

The background of the page is a stylized, low-poly illustration of the two main characters from Dishonored 2, Corvo Attano and Emily Kaldwin, standing on a dark, angular platform. Corvo is in the foreground, wearing his signature black hood and mask, holding a silver dagger. Emily stands behind him, wearing a dark coat with a white collar and holding a glowing, flaming orb. The background is a dark, industrial-looking environment with large, angular structures and faint, golden text like 'G • LIVE' and '• TH' visible on some surfaces.

ROLLING THE DICE IN DISHONORED 2

PART II

Back in Karnaca to dethrone
Delilah. Will luck be kind?

By Alex Spencer

The variables shuffle once more, like tumblers in a lock. And so, as Emily Kaldwin arrives in the Dust District, ready to strike the fourth target off her list, the former empress is right back where she started. On the boat over, I rolled the dice that decide our shared fate, with mixed results. The D4 rolled a 3, meaning I can freely choose who to kill. The D6 landed on 6, its free space – no extra modifiers. But on the D12, a 12: *Delete all powers.*

In fact, this leaves Emily a little *less* well off than when it all began. Among the abilities I wipe away is Far Reach, which *Dishonored 2* gives you as a freebie. No more teleporting for me, then. I've still got my double jump, though – even I'm not enough of a masochist to tape down my controller's A button.

But hey, some people choose to play the *whole game* without powers, and I'm starting to see why. It encourages a style of play that's more creative, reactive and – in my case, at least – ruthless. A flammable whisky bottle burns the first guard I encounter to a crisp. A canister of our old friend whale oil is popped with a crossbow bolt, clearing out an entire patrol of guardsmen. In one particularly tight corner, I just reach for the pistol and blast my way out. OK, maybe not always *that* creative.

My objective is the mansion of mine baron Aramis Stilton, locked away behind an enormous unbreakable door. There are two potential approaches here: I can step into the midst of a gang war, take out the leader of one faction, and present their body to the other side. Or I can try to break the lock by myself.

Finally, a chance to use the pirate-themed plastic coin that's been sat next to my dice this whole time, sadly unflipped. It comes up heads: crack the code.

This is no regular lock, I should note. This is a Jindosh Lock, created by the moustache-twirling Tony Stark wannabe I fed to his own brainwashing machine last time round. It's characteristically obtuse, unlocked by solving a riddle involving ladies at a dinner party, which colour they're wearing, what they're drinking, and which heirloom they're carrying.

I suspect Jindosh would appreciate the overly elaborate spreadsheet-and-dice system I've constructed

for this playthrough. (Well, not *anymore*. His appreciating-things days are well and truly over.)

There's nothing else for it. I crack open a fresh spreadsheet, lay out the riddle's information on an increasingly arcane set of grids, and spend the next half-hour with my head in my hands muttering "this is impossible". And then, suddenly "unless..."

From that one eureka, the gaps practically fill in themselves. *If Baroness Finch is dressed in purple, then Countess Contee must be the one who spilled the rum!* As the door creaks open, I hurt my RSI-riddled wrist doing, for the first time in at least a decade, an Ali G-style finger snap. This is a totally involuntary reaction.

IN THE PLACE OF MY POWERS, I'M HANDED A NEAT LITTLE GADGET: THE TIMEPIECE

TIME OUT

Arriving at the mansion, Emily mutters "I feel drained", as the blue mana gauge turns grey. I'd totally forgotten: I would have been powerless for this bit of the mission, regardless of the dice's results. Ah, Lady Luck, you absolute jokester you...

In the place of my powers, I'm handed a neat little gadget: the Timepiece. It's a bronze doohickey with a whirling gyro at its centre, and three shards of glass on top like petals. It's the key to this standout mission, The Crack in the Slab, which revolves around a pretty stunning gimmick. The mansion exists in two timelines simultaneously, and with this gadget I can jump – and peek – between the two of them.

In the past, I find myself dodging the usual guard patrols. In the three years since, though, the mansion has fallen into disrepair and infested by bloodflies, rats, dogs and the odd zombie – in the present, I'm effectively very well-armed pest control. Fighting past both to overlook Stilton on his veranda, I realise I need to decide what to do with the cheesy guy.

Stilton isn't technically a target. All I need is the code to access his secret room, but that's much easier if he's not stood looking at it. He seems like a good lad – a worker, once, who never forgot his roots as he rose to power – so I just knock him out, drag him into the bushes and leave him there. This is what passes for mercy, in the *Dishonored* universe.

But when I jump back to the future, evading a guard patrol, everything is different. Colourful, almost. Sunny. The rats and flies are gone, and instead I'm dodging butlers and maids. It turns out that Stilton's enforced sleepytyme means he missed the séance that summoned Delilah, the game's big bad – which I get to witness, in the aforementioned secret room – and caused his mind to snap.

It's not just his mansion that's in better nick, with the mine baron at its head – the entire Dust District looks better off. Which, in a cheeky bonus,

THE RULES

1. Powers and playstyle chosen by the dice.

2. Roll for new rules each mission.

3. Stick by them, no matter what.



The pair of suckers who tried to crack the Jindosh Lock before me.



✶ makes it much easier for me to get back to the boat without any fuss. Karma! In my favour!

BACK-DOOR ACTION

In fact, back aboard my ship in the present, Stilton has joined our little resistance. He helps lay out my next mission: eliminate Duke Luca Abele, the last of Delilah's cronies, and find where he's stashed the magical MacGuffin that makes her immortal.

That's half the briefing. I roll the dice for the rest. *Mesmerise* – *Weapons free* – *Rob the shop*. And just like that, my powers are restored – one of them, anyway. *Mesmerise* drops a shifting eldritch tesseract into the world, consuming the attention of anyone who looks upon it. In other words, fully upgraded, it can put four people in a trance.

Before I can deal with the duke, I need to find that shop. This takes me from a boat pulled ashore, to the alley behind the shop, where the captain is banging on the back-room door like a misheard Shaggy lyric, apologising for leaving the passcode on her ship. Which, when I return to it, has been raided. Finding my way to the secure location where the contraband is stashed, I fall afoul of the local constabulary.

A klaxon blares, the heavily-armed watchtower cranks into action, and a swarm of guards rush my way. I flee upstairs, tapping into my new power to drop a *Mesmerise*. As the guards file up the stairs, they form an orderly queue to stare at this flickering chunk of extradimensional geometry. Even the ones who escape its mesmeric effect still can't squeeze past. Remembering the dice have given

CHECK THE TABLES

Want to play along at home?

Get a D4, D6, and a D12 (or just Google up some virtual dice) and compare the results against these lists.

D12: POWERS

1. Blink
2. Bend Time
3. Dark Vision
4. Devouring Swarm
5. Possession
6. Windblast
7. Domino
8. Doppelganger
9. Far Reach
10. *Mesmerise*
11. Shadow Walk
12. Delete all powers

D4: LETHALITY

1. Non-lethal
2. Kill only the target
3. Weapons free
4. Kill EVERYONE

D6: MODIFIERS

1. Black & White
2. Turn off HUD
3. Rob the shop
4. Hard combat
5. Hard stealth
6. [Free space]

me murderous carte blanche, I roll a grenade down the stairs. I don't stick around to see the results.

I get the passcode ("Serkonan wine is better than Tyvian prisons"), repeat it at the shop's back door, and *mesmerise* the shopkeeper while I clear him out. He can't take his eyes off the fidgety dance of its obsidian shards, even as I reach under his nose to grab an elixir or two.

This is a perfect example of *Dishonored 2*'s concertina structure: I spent longer on this one dice-demanded act of kleptomaniac than some full missions, all within a space I could have probably crossed in 90 seconds. On which note... I should probably get on with the mission.

DUKING IT OUT

Luca Abele is the exact opposite of Stilton. A grotesque caricature of excessive wealth and unchecked power, the kind of guy that holds orgies to decide who holds what position in his cabinet. And I get to decide whether he lives or dies? Well. Sneaking into the Duke's chambers and finding him bent over a bookshelf, I draw my sword – and notice the on-screen prompt: *press X to talk*.

There's an important detail I've left out. It seems that Abele has a body double, a much nicer chap by all accounts. When the dialogue wheel gives me the option to identify my man as the double, I take it. He confesses, and we hatch a plan to get rid of the real duke and install this lookalike in his place.

Of course, I didn't actually earn this revelation, and it occurs to me afterwards that this could be an incredibly cunning play. It's a thought that arrives just as the man's stroll turns to a run, and he slams his fist down on the alarm. Nuts. OK, a couple of hasty pistol shots to the stomach it is.

I leap out into the night air, find my way to the palace's basement, where Stilton circled a secret door on my map in whatever the Karnacan equivalent of red Sharpie is. Behind it, I'm greeted by an effigy of Delilah and... the shrill tones of Kirin Jindosh? The one whose mind I wiped? Oh – it's just a recording, echoing out of one of his Clockwork Soldiers. Which, it turns out, aren't remotely interested in my void-shard distractions. The fight that follows is too messy to recount here, but what matters is: I reduce the bot to scrap, drain the effigy and make my escape.

ALL CRASHING DOWN

And so we arrive back in Dunwall. The gloom, the smokestacks – yup, this is home alright. I pull my mask up like I'm about to step into Sainsburys for the big shop, and roll the dice: *Devouring Swarm* – *Kill everyone* – *Hard stealth*.



It's Duke Luca Abele! Or is it?



Things aren't going (stair)well for this lot.

DELILAH PLAYS HER TRUMP CARD AND DISAPPEARS INTO A MAGICAL PAINTING

I've now got a legion of rats at my command, an enemy force primed to spot the smallest mistake, and an edict to murder everyone who raises a weapon to me. The perfect cocktail for a head-first charge towards the royal tower, and to Delilah. I feed packs of stray hounds to my rats. The guilt is terrible, especially when the resulting yelps rouse my own real-life dog from his nap.

I feel less bad about the Clockwork Soldiers guarding the tower. Or the witches, who fall to a combination of Mesmerise and Devouring Swarm, gobbled up as they stare glassy-eyed into the abyss. An attempt to lug a barrel of whale oil all the way to the throne room is thwarted by an unfortunately-placed loading screen, but that turns out to be the least of my problems.

Unfortunately, Delilah can't be mesmerised and squishes my beloved rats before they can so much as nibble at her ankles and toes. So I have to resort to a good old-fashioned sword fight, eventually getting the best of her – at which point Delilah plays her trump card and disappears into a magical painting. I follow... and the game crashes to the desktop.

I try again, and again. I try the sneaky approach. I try a head-on assault. On the advice of a forum, I try never looking left or right. Then I try spinning like a dervish for some unknown reason. I run the game in Windows 7 compatibility mode. Whatever I try, Delilah sends me back to desktop before I can land the killing blow. I've loyally served Lady Luck all this time, and now she's turned on me, caused some unrecoverable hiccup in the underlying ones and zeroes.

Actually. There is *one* other option here. A way of making it so that I never have to follow Delilah into the painting at all. But as the non-lethal option, that would mean defying the dice. And honestly, I fear I've already angered them enough. ■



FAR LEFT: Delilah's summoning, minus one Aramis Stilton.

LEFT: The place where it all ends.



WHY I LOVE

WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL

THE CITADEL

A tribute to *Mass Effect's* city-sized space station. *By Andy Kelly*



LEFT: I'm Commander Shepard, and this is my favourite city in the galaxy.

RIGHT: The *Legendary Edition* makes the station even prettier.



Everything else aside, *Mass Effect's* Citadel is just a great piece of science fiction. This colossal 44km long space station was built generations ago – it's presumed by the extinct Prothean race, although no one's really sure. Thousands of years later, it's now populated by dozens of different species, and has become a galactic hub for trade, diplomacy, and, of course, drinking in its many neon-lit bars. It's basically a giant floating space city, with 13 million souls living and working there.

The Citadel is BioWare's take on the O'Neill cylinder, a fanciful space settlement dreamed up by American physicist Gerard K O'Neill. He proposed the idea in his 1976 book *The High Frontier: Human Colonies* in Space, which features some incredible illustrations.

One famous drawing from O'Neill's book in particular could be concept art for the Presidium, the bustling heart of the Citadel. This is the first area of the station you visit in *Mass Effect*, and it's still an impressive sight. The Presidium is a huge ring with a simulated blue sky, leafy green vegetation, gleaming white architecture, and anti-grav cars zipping past. These visuals, combined with Jack Wall's stirring, atmospheric music, make this one of the most memorable locations in the game.

PROCRASTINATION

When Shepard arrives in the Citadel, there's a lot to do, including formulating a plan to save the galaxy. But that can wait. Before I even think about driving the story forward, I love hanging out in the city, talking to

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE May 28, 2008	DEVELOPER BioWare
PUBLISHER Electronic Arts	LINK bit.ly/3vP2hX

STAR CITIZENS

Some of the people you meet on the Citadel



AVINA

An information VI (virtual intelligence) who can fill you in on the history of the Citadel and help you navigate the sprawling station.



SHA'IRA

Also known as the Consort, this influential asari is a problem solver, therapist, and pretty much anything her clients desire.



HARKIN

A grouchy officer for C-Sec, the Citadel's police force. Harkin has a bad reputation for roughing up suspects and taking bribes on the side.



BARLA VON

On the surface, a banker. But in actuality, an agent of the Shadow Broker, the galaxy's most powerful and feared dealer of info.

people, and working my way through the selection of sidequests on offer there. The first game's version of the Citadel is composed of two distinct areas: the aforementioned Presidium, where bankers, diplomats, and other high-society types hang out; and the Wards, residential districts where regular citizens tend to spend their time. It's actually a pretty small map, with the illusion of, rather than real, scale, but it works. You forget that everything's happening in the same handful of corridors.

BEFORE DRIVING THE STORY FORWARD, I LOVE HANGING OUT IN THE CITY

As you explore these two very different sides of the Citadel, picking up sidequests and nosing into people's business, you get a sense of what life is like on the station. Few sci-fi games give you this kind of slice of life experience. Shepard settles a dispute between two scientist rivals, deals with an overenthusiastic fan, works with a journalist to expose a corrupt club owner, and other low stakes tasks that add detail to the setting and make it feel like a real, functioning place. And the ambience

of the Citadel is so incredibly chill, running around doing these odd jobs never feels like a chore.

I also love the Keepers. These insect-like creatures can be found all over the Citadel, tinkering with control panels. They seem unaware of their surroundings, and no one really knows where they come from. For as long as the Citadel has existed, they've been scurrying around it, silently repairing things, and keeping the place running. This adds to the mystery of the station's origins, and it's a superb piece of world-building. *Mass Effect* takes a lot of its best ideas from the mature science fiction of the 1960s and '70s, but it has enough of its own personality and imagination not to feel derivative.

The more you play the *Mass Effect* trilogy, the more you learn about the truth of the Citadel, the Keepers, and other elements that are initially enigmatic. But even when you learn about its true purpose, it's still a fascinating setting, and one of the best virtual cities BioWare has ever created – and this is a studio that has created some of the best, from *Baldur's Gate II's* Athkatla, to *Knights of the Old Republic's* Ahto City. Exactly what the next *Mass Effect* game will be, or when it'll be set, remains to be seen, but I hope we return to the Citadel in some form. ■



LEFT: Apparently people in space love getting drunk as much as people on Earth do.



RIGHT: Views of the larger structure give the place an incredible sense of scale.





REINSTALL

OLD GAMES, NEW PERSPECTIVES



**“I am ready to embark on my own
journey through Middle-earth”**



THE LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE

A bittersweet return to Middle-earth. *By Steven Messner*

I deeply miss those brief few years when *The Lord of the Rings* had taken over the world. It wasn't just the movies but all the spin-off games too – those incredibly fun action-RPGs based on the movies, real-time strategy games like *Battle for Middle-earth*, and even the surprisingly great *Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor* and *Shadow of War*. But of the dozens of games set in Tolkien's fantasy universe, only one has successfully wormed its way into my brain and never left: *The Lord of the Rings Online*.

I've easily spent more time since its 2007 launch thinking about playing *TLOTRO* than actually playing it. I'm enchanted by the idea of a fully explorable Middle-earth, but MMOs are big, time-consuming games.

Despite a few attempts, I just never got into *TLOTRO* as much as I want to. But with news that Amazon Games' attempt at making a *Lord of the Rings* MMO was now dead, it got me thinking about this 14-year-old game and the tiny community that's kept it quietly going for so long. It was time to try again.

HOBBIT FORMING

After suffering through the age-old MMO problem of being forced to choose a class based on nothing but a paragraph of general description, I am ready to embark on my own journey through Middle-earth. Feeling nostalgic, I decided to play a hobbit Guardian, which means I specialise in wielding big shields and full plate armour. It doesn't sound very hobbit-like, but the in-game description tells me this class was inspired directly by

Samwise Gamgee's stalwart devotion to Frodo. I guess the 200 pounds of plate mail I'm sporting is a metaphor for how ol' Sam had to carry Frodo's lazy ass halfway up a volcano. Share the load and all that.

Despite being such an old MMO, *The Lord of the Rings Online* surprises me with how involved its storytelling is. Instead of dropping me into the Shire and setting me loose, there's a hours-long prologue complete with cutscenes that immediately suck me into the fantasy of this world.

It's night time and I'm walking on one of the main roads through the Shire when I bump into a hobbit cop called a Bounder. He questions me about being out so late, but before long we're interrupted by some familiar faces: Frodo, Samwise, and



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
April 24, 2007

PUBLISHER
Daybreak Games

DEVELOPER
Standing Stone Games

LINK
TLOTRO.com



Despite 14 year old graphics, Aragorn is surprisingly hunky.



- Pippin. I realise immediately the significance of what is happening and can't help but smile. Frodo and company are just beginning their grand adventure, fleeing from the Shire while chased by Ringwraiths who have finally pinned down the location of Sauron's One Ring.

It's a classic scene from the books but with the twist of being able to spectate it as a bystander. Sensing danger, Frodo and crew have the good idea to ditch the main road and hoof it through the wilderness just as a Ringwraith comes galloping up. It interrogates me and the hobbit cop before taking off after its prey.

PAYING THE TOLL

If there's a clear strength to *TLOTRO*, it's that it colours in the missing pieces of the Fellowship's journey to destroy the One Ring. Before Aragorn sets off to join Frodo and Sam in Bree, we help him unravel a bandit conspiracy to destroy a village. I reunite a sheriff with his son and then fight in a dramatic showdown with the bandits. There's some real momentum to the story here, and then all of that grinds to a halt.

After finishing the prologue, I'm not immediately whisked off on my own epic adventure. Instead I'm

dropped into Hobbiton and run face-first into that tedious MMO grind. At this point, *TLOTRO*'s MMO roots trip me up as I come to realise the long road that awaits me. There's more cinematic story quests to experience, but they're now spread out and gated behind levels that I can only earn by doing much more menial chores. I putter around a bit, suddenly feeling overwhelmed by how my quest log has ballooned in

size with mindless busywork and wondering if I'm really up to investing countless hours muscling through sidequests at the promise of being slowly drip-fed a 3D interpretation of Middle-earth.

ON THE LEVEL

I decide to Google how long it takes to reach max level. I'm not at all encouraged by Reddit responses like "I've been playing for eight years and I'm still only level 83 [of 130]". I'm sure that person is just taking their time, but the gravity of the investment required hits me.

It's not at all helped by *TLOTRO*'s messy approach to free-to-play either. Instead of keeping everything tied to its eight main expansions, Middle-earth is diced up into dozens of quest packs that are specific to certain zones. Features like certain races, classes, mounts, abilities, passive perks, and cosmetics litter the cash shop, making me feel overwhelmed.

Like a city built on the ruins of an old one which itself was built on the foundations of an even older city, *The Lord of the Rings Online* feels haphazard and incongruous. And it adds so much unnecessary friction for newcomers like me who just want to get lost in this world. I desperately

LORD OF THE GAMES

The best PC games set in Middle-earth



MIDDLE-EARTH: SHADOW OF MORDOR

This standard action-RPG is renowned for its innovative Nemesis System that gives orcs dynamic personalities and special abilities that evolve each time you encounter them.

Our review: **85**



THE LORD OF THE RINGS: RETURN OF THE KING

This fairly simple action-RPG lets you play as different members of the Fellowship and masterfully recreates the chaos and scale of the third film's big battles.

Our review: **58**



THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE BATTLE FOR MIDDLE-EARTH 2

Big battles defined the films, and *Battle for Middle-earth 2* turned them into an intense strategy game similar in many ways to the *Warhammer: Total War* series.

Our review: **90**



ABOVE: The Shire is as idyllic a place as ever.

RIGHT: Players can compose music for several different instruments.



wish it had followed in the footsteps of other MMOs like *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, which long ago simplified everything by overhauling its quests so that players could focus entirely on the main story and forget the tedious grind.

TO BREE

Feeling dejected, I'm about ready to give up. But that promise of a Middle-earth and all its splendours is still too enticing for me to let go completely. I alt-tab out of the game and watch some videos to get a taste of some of the different zones available in the games.

Wanting to see some of these places for myself, I decide to set out and go as far as the game will let me. Eventually some paywall will stop me, I figure, or monsters will become such a high level that survival becomes a statistical impossibility. So I do the most un-hobbit-like thing possible and leave the Shire behind me. I decide that Bree might be a fun village to stop at on my way out of dodge – if only just to see the Inn at the Prancy Pony, one of the more iconic locations from the first film.

I arrive in Bree just as the sun has set. I wander the streets, looking for this famous inn and find it tucked

THE CROWD ERUPTS INTO APPLAUSE AS PLAYERS LIGHT OFF FIREWORKS

into the northeastern corner of the walled town, but before I can even set foot inside my attention is stolen by something altogether remarkable. In the square right next to the inn, dozens of players of all levels have gathered and are dancing, shouting, and cheering. Surrounding the dance floor are different troupes of bards. It hits me: this is a music festival.

MUSIC TO MY EARS

I knew *TLOTRO* had a system where players could play instruments, but I'd never seen it in action. These small bands are each taking turns playing tunes, and between each song the crowd erupts into applause as players light off fireworks that explode high above us. Until now, I had seen a few players as I wandered around the Shire, but now I am surrounded by several dozen.

Seeing another hobbit in the crowd named Tiddley, I send her a

private message on a whim. She tells me she's been playing for a decade. "I love the lore of the game," she says. "And there's always something to do. Be it raiding, dancing, playing music, fishing, or decorating the house."

We chat for a bit and she talks about how great *TLOTRO*'s community is. "Most of the people that play are very helpful if you have a question or need help with a quest or something crafted," Tiddley says.

Our conversation leaves me feeling even more conflicted than I was before. I was ready to give up on *TLOTRO* for good, thinking that whatever potential was there is now buried under microtransactions and grinding. But seeing how tightly knit its community still is tells me I'm missing something, and it eats at me.

I watch the bards take turns playing for a while longer, wishing I saw in this MMO what others do. I'm envious of these players and the connection they must have with this world, but I just can't imagine spending hundreds of hours of my life in an MMO so deeply in its twilight years. *The Lord of the Rings Online* must've been a special game to have kept people like Tiddley playing for so many years, but it's hard to see that magic today. ■



TYLER WILDE



The eye doctor says I've got a hole in my retina. I guess those 1990s GPU ads where lightning is coming out of the monitor weren't kidding around.



AMID EVIL

newblood.games/amidevil

→ A *Heretic* throwback (think *Doom* but with magic) set in an ultra-cool astral fantasy landscape, now with Nvidia ray tracing support. (Check the Steam settings for a beta branch if the RTX update hasn't released yet.) Looks great either way, and you can use the planet Earth as a grenade.



SERIOUS SAM 4

croteam.com

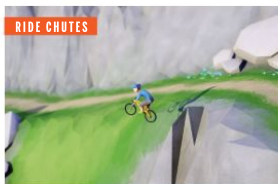
→ The sort of shooter people say "well, I mean, it's *not great*" about while recommending it. Get this bad boy on sale and dual-wield big dumb shotguns (don't think too hard about the reloading process), pilot a big mech, and run over hordes of big aliens with a big combine.



MASS EFFECT LEGENDARY EDITION

bit.ly/3e0v4R0

→ There's been some debate on the PC Gamer team over whether the *Mass Effect* remaster looks good or misses the point. I think it looks like *Mass Effect*, but remastered. Maybe I'm simple, but I'm just having fun hanging out with my space pals now that their faces aren't so blurry.



LONELY MOUNTAINS: DOWNHILL

lonelymountains.com

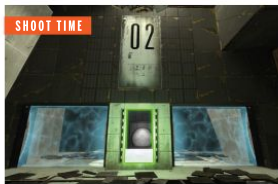
→ Despite the occasional sprays of pixel blood, guiding a cyclist down mountains is relaxing. You can get into a nice zone steering around curves and bends and over ledges you're sure he can handle. He can't, but that's OK. He'll respawn so you can throw him off more ledges.



ROCKET LEAGUE

rocketleague.com

→ Have you played *Rocket League* since it went free-to-play? It's just like it was when I recommended it last time, but freer and with more cosmetic junk. Play Snow Day and you might find me hovering around Diamond rank. (Fordpinto is the name, and being OK is the game.)



PORTAL RELOADED

bit.ly/3eRQ9tN

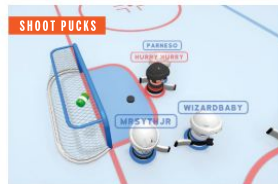
→ This is a free *Portal 2* mod that runs as a standalone game (though you do need to own *Portal 2* to claim it). It's a bunch of new test chambers, but also a special new kind of portal. Your first test: walk through a door that won't open for 20 years. Did I mention it's free?



HALF-LIFE: ALYX

half-life.com/alyx

→ You have to pay the Mark Zuckerberg data collection toll to use it, but the Facebook-ified Oculus Quest 2 and link cable are priced low enough that it finally feels reasonable to recommend VR games. If you get one, definitely play *Half-Life: Alyx*, if just to smash some full wine bottles.



SLAPSHOT: REBOUND

slapshotthegame.com

→ Sometimes during an intermission at NHL games, they bring out kids to play a scrimmage. They glide around batting at the puck, bouncing off each other, and falling over. Occasionally, one of them scores somehow. It's a great show. This is that, basically, and it's free on Steam.



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- ▶ Inspires insane frenzies in his followers
- ▶ Perpetually leaking

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